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NOVELS



BIG-BOOK WESTERN
MAGAZINE 15¢

DECEMBER

2 BIG NOVELS BY 2 TOP-HAND AUTHORS!



DEC.

15¢ BIG-BOOK WESTERN

LINE

GUN-CALL OF THE TIMBER GODS

A GREAT BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL
by HARRY F. OLMSTED



POWDERSMOKE PEACE

by LEE BOND

Let me help you give fine
I'll trust you - I'll give you
10 MONTHS to Pay

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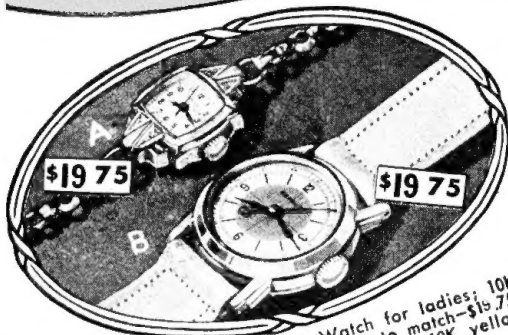
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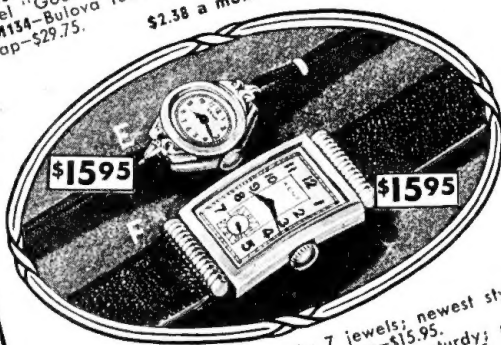
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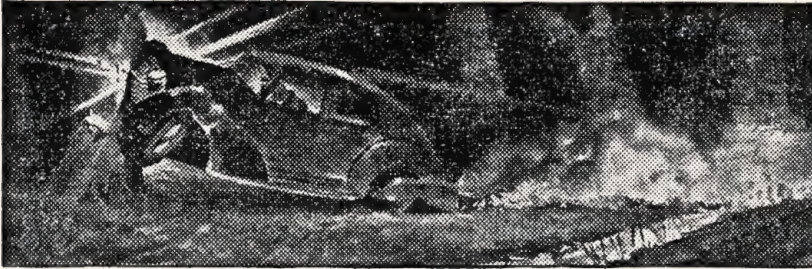
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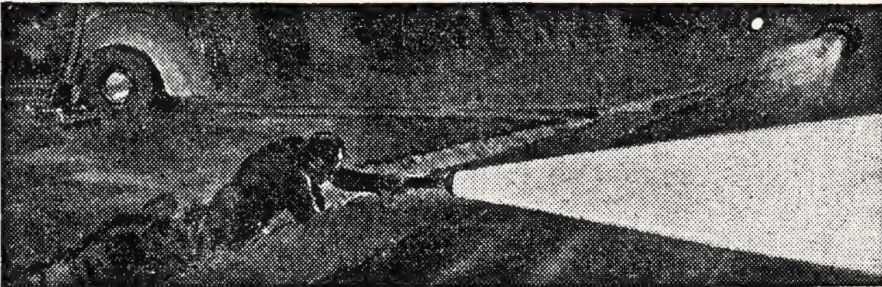
"MY CRIES WERE WHISPERS AS MY LIFE EBBED!"

A true experience of P. S. NICHOLLS, South Bend, Ind.



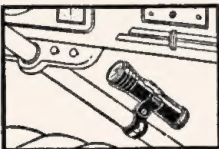
"LATE ONE NIGHT, returning from a fishing trip, I dozed at the wheel of my car while going at a fast clip," writes Mr. Nicholls. "Suddenly there was a blinding crash!"

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ALL STORIES NEW!

MAGAZINE

NO SERIALS!

Vol. 8, No. 4

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Hats Off to Hollywood!

THE inquiring photographer of our favorite newspaper has a question today that is right down our alley. Here it is: "Richard Thorpe, movie director, says it's the women who go to see the Western pictures. Is this true?"

He went to half a dozen New York theater managers for the answer. Two said, "Yes." Two said, "No." And two said, "It all depends."

We weren't asked, but we'd like to put in our two cents anyway. Because the whole thing brings up a fairly closely related subject that is our major interest.

To the photog's question, we'd have to string along with those last two theater managers. It all depends on whether the movie is Grade A or Grade F. If it's a top-notch picture, with a first rate cast, the chances are it'll draw a crowded house; and since women have more time than men for movies, the chances are there'll be more of them in the audience.

But, the way we see it, that isn't the principal point. The whole thing revolves around one very simple fact: that Western movies are better today than ever before. In the last two years Hollywood has awakened to the realization that the public wants to see the top-grade stars in pictures that truthfully depict the thrilling epic of the American West. As a result the big studios, for the first time, have been turning out movies worthy of the old frontier.

It's high time, we say. The old-style "horse operas" were an insult to the intelligence of any self-respecting Western fan. Everyone who loves the West knows that the old frontier was never like they made it out to be. Americans today know more about the pioneering days out there than they ever have before, because of the many fine magazines that conscientiously strive to recreate the flesh-and-blood truth of that glamorous period in our nation's history.

Western magazines have improved

steadily in the last twenty years. Competition has kept them on their toes. There are dozens of them on the newsstands, and only the best survive. Readers are quick to detect carelessness, ignorance, insincerity or any of the countless sins that mark the second-raters. The magazines that have lived have had to be good.

This has worked two ways. As the magazines have improved, the number of Western readers has increased. And, as the number of fans has grown, understanding of the pioneers and their titanic struggles has become common knowledge to millions. There is scarcely a household in the land that does not include at least one ardent Western fan.

These millions of people comprise a well-informed, authoritative audience. They know how the Old West really was. You can't fool them—with either movies or stories that are inaccurate.

Ten years ago there were gloomy prognosticators who insisted that people were tired of reading about the West. They foresaw a not-distant day when Western magazines would just curl up and die. The past decade has proved them very wrong. There are five times as many Western fiction publications today as there were in 1930. It is impossible to estimate the increase in their reading public.

And our prediction is that *good* Westerns, whether magazines or movies, will remain popular for a long time to come. They are honestly trying to bring to life a richly exciting, romantic, glamorous phase of our heroic history; and any American, man, woman or child, will thrill to it as long as the courageous traditions of our forefathers direct our destiny.

THE EDITOR

The 97-Pound Weakling..

*who became "The World's
Most Perfectly
Developed
Man"*

**"I'll prove that YOU, too, can
be a NEW MAN"—Charles Atlas**

I DON'T care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it I can add **SOLID MUSCLE** to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double-quick time! Only 15 minutes a day—right in your own home—is all the time I ask of you! And there's no cost if I fail.

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(Please print or write plainly)

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Only a bullet-proof lumberman like Brett Madison could have fought the Storm Bench Pool's last-stand battle single-handed . . . when, for a few measly dollars and a shrewd banker's lies, the very neighbors he hoped to save—ganged up with hired gunmen in the hunt for his scalp!



Only a bullet-proof lumberman like Brett Madison could have fought the Storm Bench Pool's last-stand battle single-handed . . . when, for a few measly dollars and a shrewd banker's lies, the very neighbors he hoped to save—ganged up with hired gunmen in the hunt for his scalp!



Chapter I

STORM BENCH PAYOFF

PRETT MADISON swung off the train before

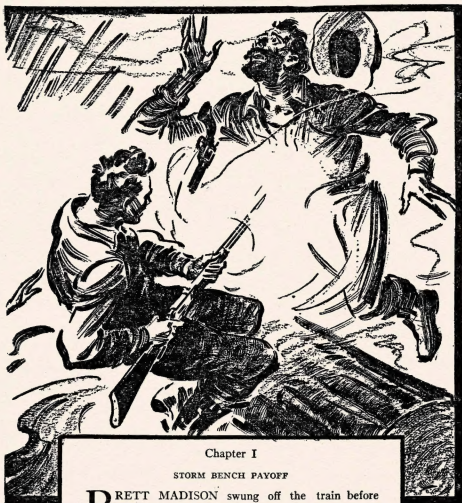
STORM BENCH PAYOFF



GUN CALL of the TIMBER GODS

A book-length epic of a roaring frontier

By HARRY F. OLMSTED



Chapter I

STORM BENCH PAYOFF

BRETT MADISON swung off the train before it stopped, shouldered through the crowd on the station platform and hurried past the depot

toward the main business section of White Falls. Even in a land of towering sawmill hands and lumberjacks, his was a figure to command attention. Wide shoulders, tapering legs and straight-gazing gray eyes marked him as all man, moving confidently through a man's world.

He was doubly conspicuous as he paused to read the glittering sign marking the White Falls' bank. In this better part of town, his patched, scuffed boots, his threadbare corduroys, his frayed coat sleeves, caused fastidious townsmen to swerve around him, their faces reflecting scorn of a timber beast who had stepped out of place. But more than one woman, glimpsing his great physique, the confidence on his face and his purposeful aloofness, turned for another look, sighing romantically.

Brett entered the bank, his jaw set stubbornly. The place was finished with log pillars and burl paneling, not ornate, but smacking of great stands of timber, of sweating crews and the mighty effort of changing forest giants into sawed lumber fit for man's use. Lumbering had made the bank, and the bank had taken its place in the industry.

A stiff-necked clerk came to wait on Brett. "What was it for you, sir!"

"I want to see about a loan," Brett said.

"A loan?" The clerk froze. "How much?"

"Ten thousand dollars."

The man looked at him pityingly. "Ten thousand? Humph, you do want a loan. That would require a lot of collateral. What can you offer?"

"Legal control over two billion feet of prime timber. The best stand in the Two Medicine Timber Belt," said Brett. "Bar none."

"Oh-h-h!" The clerk's eyes showed interest. "Come with me. Mister Kershaw is busy now. He's the president of the bank, you know. He will have to approve the loan. Right this way, Mister. . ."

Brett spoke his name, followed the clerk to an anteroom, at the far side of which stood a glass door bearing the announcement: MILES KERSHAW—PRESIDENT.

The clerk timidly opened the door, announced Brett and said, "Boss is busy for a bit. When those men come out, you go on in."

Brett picked up a lumberman's journal and waited. A drone of voices drifted through the partition. After a few minutes the doorknob turned and the panel began to swing open.

A rich, Irish brogue came clearly. "Yez have been more'n ginerous, Mister Kershaw. With your fifty thousand dollar loan, I'll be after buildin' the narrow gauge up Alder Gulch an' across Storm Bench within ninety days. 'Tis nice of yez, too, to start Great Western cuttin' timber now. I'll be needin' the haulin' to pay my bills. Begorra, I'll be down to me last dime before I get the fur-r-rst ingine rollin'. Good day to yez, gentlemen."

"Good day, Brodie."

A brawny Irishman popped out, his face red from smiling, his eyes snapping. Brett watched him pass through the anteroom, his heart pumping, doubting his senses. A railroad up Alder Gulch! If true, this news spelled the answer to the riddle that had plagued Brett and the dozen-odd small timber owners who had proved their claims on Storm Bench. Unable to credit his ears, Brett leaped up, darted after the Irishman, caught him near the door.

"Mister Brodie," he begged, "I want to ask you something." And, when the man spun to face him: "I overheard what you said. You really starting to lay rails?"

Brodie batted his eyes, his face chilling. "Shure, an' if yez heard that, Bucko, yez heard wrong. Oi'm not afther bein' crazy, my bye. Now good day to yez. I'm busy."

HE STRODE away, his blocky shoulders rolling aggressively. Brett stared after him, puzzled. He knew he had heard

right, and yet. . . Frowning, he turned back into the anteroom.

He could hear a man's smooth voice through the partially opened door to the president's office. "Damned if I understand you, Miles. A fifty thousand loan to Brodie will strap this bank. What were you thinking of?"

A flat little cough sounded, then: "Well . . . er . . . Glendon, we'll struggle along, somehow. Have to tighten our belts, you know, if we're to get ahead. Ahem-m-m, you heard Brodie say he would need timber to haul when he finishes his narrow gauge. Heard him say he would be broke, didn't you? Well, if he don't get logs, he'll fold up, default his loan and we'll take him over."

"But Miles, you said—"

"I'd cut logs, Glendon. Er . . . ah . . . a business man can change his mind. Pretty nice, owning the road to haul our timber, eh? Great Western won't cut a stick for Brodie. Ahem-m-m, I've puzzled for a long time how we could get rails in there . . . cheap. Fifty thousand *is* cheap. What Brodie puts in won't cost us a dime. Not a blessed red cent!"

Glendon laughed contentedly. "Damned if you aren't a shrewd one, Miles. You've got a head on you. It's plain we've got the right man in this bank. Go to it. If the bank gets cramped, let us know. We'll raise the money to play for your kind of stakes."

Brett stood frozen, listening. Shocked though he was, at the banker's duplicity, he saw that the scheme played right into the hands of the Storm Bench Timber Pool. It was puzzling why Brodie had lied, yet comforting to know that he would need Storm Bench logs to save his skin.

The door opened. A stout man hurried past, and Brett was looking at the man framed in the portal.

"Ah—who are you? What are you doing outside my door?"

Brett met two deep-sunk, burning eyes

in a sallow, lugubrious face. This thin, unhealthy looking, faultlessly dressed man was Miles Kershaw, the banker. Brett was in no doubt as to that.

"I'm here to see about a loan," he said.

"But now. . ."

"Oh, yes, you're Madison." Bony fingers caught Brett's arm with an iron grip. "Come in here."

When Brett was seated, with Kershaw looking at him across the great desk, Brett felt the uncomfortable impact of an icy unfriendliness here. Those eyes bored him like chill gimlets.

The dry, parsimonious banker rubbed his hands raspily. "Now . . . ah . . . let us see, Madison." The voice was like the rustling of dead leaves. "You stood out there listening. How . . . er . . . how much did you hear?"

"I'm not exactly deaf, Kershaw."

"Ah-h-h." Kershaw coughed. "Ahem-m! I judge not. Humph. A loan, you said. For what? Timber? Ah-h-h. Sorry, the bank has too many timber loans. Have to watch our capital, you know, keep it fluid."

Brett permitted himself a smile. "That's all right, Mister Kershaw. I came for a loan to build a wagon road down Alder Gulch, so the Storm Bench Pool could get its logs out. But it won't be necessary."

The banker's eyes narrowed. "Er . . . you . . . you're thinking of the—"

"Narrow gauge," Brett finished. "No use our building a road that will be in Pat Brodie's way. No, we'll wait."

BRETT saw the flash and flare of those sunken eyes, but otherwise this fleshless, cold-blooded man showed no emotion. Indeed, he seemed to smile a little, as if at some secret joke. He pushed a button, and the fleshy Glendon opened the door. "Want me, Miles?"

"Come in and shut the door, Glendon. Quite so. Now sit. Ahem-m-m! Glendon, this man eavesdropped our talk with Brodie. He's from Storm Bench. You grasp

the significance, of course, Glendon?"

Anger reddened Glendon's face. His fists balled. "You sneaking snake!" he said.

"Tut, Glendon!" Kershaw wagged a bony finger. "Nothing to get aroused about. I . . . ahem-m-m . . . cat's out of the bag, so to speak." He swung on Brett, pulling on his long jaw. "It's this way, Madison. Deals like this must be kept quiet. Fact is, we're working on a deal with the government to lease all idle timber land on the Bench. If people learn about the railroad they'll rush up there for timber claims. Er . . . you understand, I'm sure, our need to protect our deal and keep the railroad business under cover."

Brett grinned, shook his head. "Yes," he said. "I understand perfectly, without having any sympathy with you. You ask me to keep quiet so a big company can gobble that timber and freeze out poor folks who are entitled to file on it. I don't like the idea, Kershaw."

Dull fire blazed in Kershaw's eyes. "You're a crusader, Madison, but certainly not a business man. Ahem-m-m, there are many things a youth like you can't understand. If you're worrying about your starvation timber pool, I can set your mind at rest. You'll all be taken care of. Matter of fact, I've had cruisers on the Bench for some time. When their reports are in, I'll be buying patented timber claims."

"For how much?"

"Well . . . er . . . that depends on the stand. I'll have to work that out. But you, now . . . let's take your case. Tell you what, Madison. This bank will pay you twenty thousand dollars for your timber, sight unseen—with one proviso. Take the first train out of this section and stay out. A fortune, my boy. Think what you can do with twenty thousand dollars."

Brett rose, leaned across the desk. His face was pale and his fingers worked.

"You can't buy me off, you two-bit shyster crook. And you can't buy my silence. Twenty thousand dollars! Lis-

ten, every hundred and sixty acres up there can log sixteen thousand dollars every year . . . as long as the owner lives. The answer is . . . no!"

Glendon glared, in red-faced rage. "Why, you—"

"Glendon!" Kershaw's voice crackled. "None of that!" He beamed on Brett. "My boy, you're nobody's fool. My offer of a fortune didn't turn your head. I like to see a man figure things out for himself. Tell you what. I'll raise my bid to twenty-five thousand and offer you a position with Great Western Timber, a good position. Five thousand a year to start."

Brett eyed him sullenly. "Didn't understand me, did you, Kershaw? Can't get it through your sly mind that money ain't everything? Some day you'll wish you'd learned that lesson, mister. The answer is still no."

He turned on his heel, eyes flashing. As he strode out the door, he could hear the banker's carefully manicured fingernails tapping on the desk top.

Out on the street Brett gulped drafts of fresh air, as if to rid his lungs of some poisonous miasma, then headed for the depot. There, he learned his train to Pine-dale pulled out an hour before midnight. He had nine hours to kill and they seemed an age, what with his impatience to carry the news to the Storm Bench Pool.

Brett walked about the town, spent an hour watching the big sawmill, thrilling to the song of the whirling blades as they sliced the logs into boards. Darkness came to White Falls, and Brett bought a meal, begrudging the small cost. When he finished eating and bought his ticket, he had money left for a sack of tobacco. Beyond that, the future stretched dark and doubtful. It seemed, somehow, to hang upon Brodie's luck with the projected narrow gauge. Twenty-five thousand! Brett snorted. Badly as the Pool need money, thoughts of Kershaw's offer brought him anger, not regret.

At ten thirty, Brett gave up watching a poker game in a corner saloon and headed along a dark street toward the depot. Behind him, as he walked, sounded footsteps and a cheery whistle. A backward glance showed him a hurrying man, head down, hands thrust deep in his pockets. He was whistling a bawdy lumberjack tune, walking fast. He took no apparent notice of Brett, who pulled aside to let him pass. As Brett turned his eyes front, something hit him behind the ear with terrific force.

Brett's head exploded in a blaze of fire. His knees went rubbery. Desperately he tried to catch himself, half turning, throwing up his arms. A laugh rang faintly in his ears, ebbing into a roaring void. Blackness overcame him. He moaned, pitched headlong and knew no more.

Chapter II

BACK FROM THE DEAD

DAWN brought rain to the tumbled up-lands of the Two Medicine Timber Belt. It washed the stately pines, sluiced down the gullies, roared through the creeks and thundered into flood crest that filled the rivers, bank to bank.

Two days and two nights it rained, turning White Falls' streets into loblollies of mud, filling the town with the odor of dank sawdust. With rain sloshing at his window, Miles Kershaw sat behind his great desk at the bank, his dry cough accentuated by the dampness, his mind busy with a dozen details of his latest investment project.

He had summoned Pat Brodie to his office, urging him to hire and equip double track crews. He had telegraphed the steel company at the capitol, using the leverage of the bank to assure early delivery of tracking. He had spread the word to the mills that Great Western only awaited improved transportation to embark upon

a tremendous cutting program. He smiled out at the rain—cold rain falling on the cold clay of a fool who had dared to buck him.

Through two dawns the skies had been weeping. The third brought the face of the sun breaking through the clouds.

Twenty miles out of White Falls, buzzards wheeled over the cliffs, came spiraling down in search of food to sate a two-day hunger. They volplaned to the foot of a thousand-foot shale slide, banking their pinions and lighting on rocks about a huddled man-shape. Their barren necks craned and their beady eyes stared. They hopped closer, chuckling and snapping their crusty beaks.

Then, with a rush of wings, they soared aloft again. Their prey was not carrion. It had moved.

Brett Madison moaned, writhed and struggled to revive the faint flame of life remaining to him. And, as he emerged from the shadows, he was conscious of wet chill and pain. He opened his eyes, saw the buzzards, and roused the will to live. He couldn't die . . . yet.

It was when he moved that the real pain came. He was one great sore, yet in his chilled limbs was still the power of movement. He gritted his teeth, rolled to his knees. Then he saw the shale slide, and the past came flooding back. Someone had slugged him, then thrown him over yonder sky-reaching caprock. How could a man live after that deadly descent? Yet he had, with only cuts, scratches and bruises to show for it. . . This had been Kershaw's work, Brett was sure. Well, Kershaw had failed.

Brett moved his arms gingerly, then his legs. The sun, beating down, was driving the chill from his flesh, increasing his agony. But he could stand pain if that were the price he must pay to thwart Kershaw.

He rested on hands and knees, shaking his head from side to side like a wounded

bear. The music of gurgling water reminded him of his great thirst. Painfully he moved. It took him an hour to make a hundred yards. Then he buried his face in cool, sweet water, and drank and drank.

He slept then. The sun was going down when he came to and found he could rise. Like a drunken man, he stumbled aimlessly down the creek bank, following the line of least resistance. He had no idea where he was, less than that where he was going. Every step was agony.

Somehow he kept erect, dragging one foot after another. Night came and a chill wind with it. Brett's torn and tattered clothes were poor protection. His pace grew slower and slower. How long he had traveled he couldn't have told, when he saw a light ahead, and sparks spouting from a chimney. He reeled toward it, crashed into a door and pitched to his face, unconscious.

HHE AWOKE, gagging from a forced draft of whiskey. He lay in a bunk, wrapped in thick blankets. A rheumy-eyed oldster stood beside him with a jug in his hand.

"Take it easy, son," the man cautioned. "You're amongst friends and you'll soon be fit as a fiddle. Maw! Hey, Maw! He's awake now, so fetch him in some of that soup. . . . What happened to you, young feller? Look like you tried to out-den a panther."

"I don't know," muttered Brett, truthfully enough, and was glad the man didn't press him further.

A full breasted woman came in with a big bowl of steaming soup. She stood by while Brett wolfed it.

"Good lands," she exclaimed. "You're starved. And beaten black and blue. Lucky if you don't get pneumonia. If the boys weren't in White Falls, on a payday spree, I'd have somebody go for a doctor."

"Payday?" echoed Brett. "What day is this?"

"Saturday," she told him. "Big handsome fellow like you should be in town to the dance instead of in bed. You get caught in the flood?"

"Yes'm," Brett said. "I guess I'm just plain lucky. Don't ask me about it because I don't know. I fell and . . ." He shook his head and shrugged. They didn't press him.

Brett was shocked at the time that had passed, and he begrudged further delay in getting back to Storm Bench. But he was done up, quite unable to travel. And so he forced himself to be patient.

Four days he stayed in bed, hearing the boys return, listening to the rumble of machinery, the drone of the rip saw and the yarns of the saw-mill crew. Wednesday evening he got up, had supper at the table and refused a job bucking logs. It was twenty miles to White Falls and the lumber wagon was going in, come morning.

He took leave of the old couple and the sawmill crew, promised to return and thank them properly, and climbed onto the lumber wagon. The bumping was a torment to his sore body, and it seemed it would never end. But Brett was glad that the driver, a taciturn man, made no attempt at conversation. He wanted only to think. But, as in the four days past, thoughts wouldn't come. His ticket home was gone. He must return and prepare the Pool members for their good fortune. They must resume logging and take steps to counter the thrusts that must surely come from Great Western. Kershaw would stop at nothing; Brett knew that.

It was mid-afternoon when he slid off the load in the freight yards at White Falls, to walk without a backward look toward the bank. If he was a marked man before, he was doubly so now. His eyes were black with shock; his cheeks were sunken and bearded. His clothes, patched by the woman at the sawmill, flapped about his wasted body.

Intent suddenly upon facing Kershaw again, he was within a rod of the entrance when the panel opened and Kershaw stepped out. The banker froze, staring at the apparition confronting him.

Brett halted, fixing his smoldering gaze upon Kershaw. The things he had planned to say fled his mind, swept away by the red haze of anger. The banker must have read his peril, for he emitted a squawk and whirled to dart inside.

Brett leaped, caught him and hit him, all in the same explosive effort. The banker's plaintive bleat cut off; he sailed backward, dragging the heels of his polished boots, and fell flat on his back in the slimy ooze of the street. He lay there unmoving, his gaunt face a bloody mask.

The enraged bawl of a spectator roused Brett. He saw the quick rush of men to seize him. Suddenly panicky, plagued by the thought he might have killed Kershaw, he spun on his heel, broke past three oncoming men and raced down the street, a score of irate townsmen on his heels.

AT THE first corner, Brett threw a look backward. A man with a star led the pursuit now, a gun glittering in his hand. A bullet screamed off the stone curb and the building fronts gave back the

smashing echoes of the shot. It lent speed to Brett's flashing legs—and fervor to the curses he directed at himself for making such a fool play. All it would buy him was jail, thereby giving Kershaw time to go through with his Storm Bench steal.

Sprinting, Brett drew away, swerved left between buildings, darted along an alley toward the tracks. The next shot was close, and again he ducked between walls to the street. He was faltering now, with doom facing him, as a train suddenly blocked the street, freight cars flashing north.

As Brett's steps slackened and a yell of triumph lifted behind him, a desperate gamble was born in his mind. Reckless of the gathering speed of the train, he hurled himself at a passing car, caught one of the hand rungs. It hurled him cruelly against the side of the car, but his desperate grip held. A bullet smacked the wood alongside him, then a building had hidden him from his pursuers.

Yells of rage came to his ears as he climbed to the top of the car. Looking back, he saw the marshal lining his gun. Then the train had squealed around a bend, out of range. Brett flattened out, gripping the catwalk, struggling for breath and fighting vertigo.

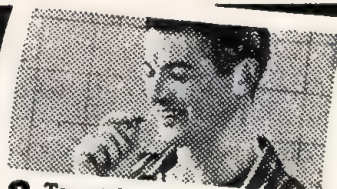
Mr. R--- makes a Confession



3 Feel like a million this morning. Ex-Lax worked fine. Didn't upset me or keep me awake last night... Boy, watch me tear into my work today!



1 Almost got fired today. Boss caught me napping at my desk. The trouble is I need a laxative. But I hate to take the awful stuff.



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A brakeman was coming forward from the caboose, with a pick handle clutched purposefully in his hand. Brett watched him come, with sullen, dangerous eyes.

The shack's voice struck over the clattering roar that filled Brett's ears. "Hey, you lousy bum! You jumped on. Now jump off and see how you like it. Or do you want a working over with this pick handle?" He leaped the gap between cars, paused before Brett, scowling, formidable. Yet there was something in his eyes that gave Brett hope. "Say . . . what happened back there. Was that bull shooting at you?"

"Yes," admitted Brett. "Rotten shot, wasn't he?"

The man grinned. "Cool one, eh? What they after you for?"

"Nothing much," Brett said softly. "I just took a crack at the town's leading jaw. Landed flush and draped White Falls' leading light in the mud."

The shack's eyes sparkled. "Leading light, eh? Who?"

"Miles Kershaw, the banker."

"Kershaw!" the brakeman shouted. "Cripes, man, you busted Kershaw? Kill him, did you?"

Brett shook his head. "I was too done up, I couldn't hit that hard."

The man's face fell. "Too bad," he said. "There's a man that sure needs killing. I ought to heave you off, neighbor, for messing up a good job. But you tried, at least. Come on back to the crummy and stretch out. You do look done up. Where you going?"

"Pinedale," said Brett, and gratefully followed the brakeman back to the caboose, where he stretched out on a blanket-ed bunk. He fell asleep, with his new friend entertaining the conductor with a vivid though largely imagined account of how their deadhead passenger had beaten the proud Miles Kershaw.

Hours later, the rear brakeman shook Brett awake. "Better snap out of it, son,"

he was advising. "We'll pull into Pinedale in five minutes. Better quit us when we slow through the yards. Number Eight, westbound, passed us couple hours ago. White Falls' law may be waiting for you at the station."

Brett came alive, conscious at once of renewed strength and vigor, buoyed by the thought he was nearing home, where he could take up the challenge of the task that lay ahead. He shook hands with the two trainmen.

"Thanks a lot, boys. Some day you'll be better paid."

"Hell, son, shoe's on the other foot. I've wanted to see somebody bust that blood-sucker for a long time. He pulled a dirty deal on me once, robbed me of the only house I ever owned. Here . . . wait." He turned to a locker, lifted out a .30-30 carbine and a belt of shells. "Take these, just in case. You can get 'em back to me later."

Brett wanted to refuse, but recalling the stakes in this game, and Kershaw's ruthlessness, he accepted. The fact that he might have to use the weapon made him scowl darkly. He had never thought to see the day when he would feel safer going armed in the woods.

A SHRILL whistle trailed back from the engine, and the train began to slow. The brakeman caught up his lantern and quit the caboose, Brett following. Dawn was threatening. Clusters of red and green lights showed ahead, winking wanly through the morning's grayness.

Brett laid his hand on the brakeman's shoulder, stepped past him and swung down. He hit the roadbed running, took a number of long strides and halted to watch the train slide into the yards. As he saw the brakeman raise his hand, he turned across the tracks and struck out. He had twenty miles to walk, but the prospect didn't dismay him. He gulped in the sweet balsam aroma on the air. He was home

again. Home again in the woods he loved.

The sun topped the pines when he hit the mouth of Alder Gulch. Partridges drummed in the thickets. The murmur of the stream made language he understood. The soughing of the pines soothed him. All these familiar sounds seemed like voices bidding him welcome to a country free of guile and treachery.

After an hour, he climbed the cutback trail to Storm Bench and plunged into an unbroken stand of giant timber. The smell of it was wine in his blood. He whistled, forgot his aches and pains and shed his worries. Miles Kershaw, sitting behind a polished desk and planning to seize this great treasure, now was only a bad memory. This forest and those who lived in it were greater than an army of crooks like Kershaw. Nature would endure and cherish its own, long after Kershaw was dead.

Lost in such thoughts, Brett was crossing a clearing, rounding a lightning-riven tree when a shout filled the wilderness. "Hold on there! Where you think you're goin'?"

Brett darted forward, crouched, trying to spot the challenger's figure in the tangle of brush ahead. His carbine was half raised.

A buzzing hornet stung his arm. The crash of a gun rang through the tree aisles, and Brett dove for cover behind a downed bole. There was a moment of silence, with Brett holding his breath, searching for the direction of the shot.

Another bullet came, spraying him with rotten wood from his parapet. Brett saw the spurt of vapor from the attacker's gun muzzle, and he levered a shell into the breech. A third slug smacked into the rotten log, bore through and kicked up dirt.

Brett was not as fearful of being drilled by such a bullet as of the possibility this gunmen had mates who could flank him. He held his fire, his glance striking right and left. But, when after some minutes

nothing had happened, he crawled to the end of the log, lined his gun and waited.

Chapter III

STARVED OUT

THE continued silence rained hammer blows against Brett's senses, in his fear of being flanked. Flat on his belly, looking over his sights, he kept his piece trained on the spot from whence had issued the vapor puff of the attacker's gun. If the man was there, he was very still. Brett began to wonder if the bushwhacker had withdrawn.

He tried to put himself in the man's place. Having failed to score a hit with those first three shots, he might have drawn off, fearful that the gunfire would draw other men to the spot. On the other hand, it seemed unreasonable he would give up so easily, while he held the advantage of being able to maneuver through the timber. No, he must be waiting like a sunning lizard, waiting for a clear target. But where?

Off to Brett's left, almost down the axis of the fallen log, a bluejay flicked from the timber, squawking raucously. The nerves pricked along Brett's spine and he shifted his weapon. The voice of the noisy bird was a warning and, daring the gunman's first position, Brett accepted it as such and rolled. A leaden slug tore into the rotten log at the spot where his head had been only a moment before.

Through the echoes came the smash of a closing rifle breech. Another bullet raked the punky log. Now Brett had his man placed. He caught the spot in his sights, pressed the trigger. From a thicket came the scream of a man, and sunlight glinted from the barrel of a spinning gun. A reeling figure burst into the open, stumbled a few steps and fell. It lay silent.

Brett didn't hurry. He was not sure just what he was up against. Ten minutes

passed. Twenty. The wounded man groaned, writhed. Finally Brett took a chance. Wary as a cougar, he ran forward, gun ready.

He caught the fallen man's arm and dragged him into a covert. Then he took time to look at the pinched-faced, shrunken man he had winged. The man was glowering at him, favoring a wound that had cracked a few ribs.

"Kill me, you devil!" he croaked. "What you waiting for?"

Brett shook his head, patted the man for weapons and then took a look at the damage.

"You're pretty lucky," he announced grimly. "And so am I. One inch one way and you'd be dead. The other way would have missed clean. As it is, you'll be sore as blazes and weak for a few days. Then you'll forget it and probably tackle another killing job for Kershaw."

A crafty fire lit in the man's sunken eyes. "You mean . . . you ain't going to kill me?"

"No. You deserve it, but—Oh, your kind wouldn't understand." Brett's mouth was a thin, white line.

"I sure don't," puzzled the man, his face twitching with pain. "I did my damndest to get you. What you gonna do with me?"

"Take you to my cabin and clean up that wound."

"Then what?" The man's eyes were writhing.

"What do you expect?" Brett equivocated. His eyes, hard as flint, bored into the other.

"I know." The killer was pleading now. "The law. They'll put me in stony lonesome. Listen, can't you just go off an' leave me? I'd sooner die a hundred times than go back to gray walls an' a barred cell."

Brett shook his head. "I can't let you die, man, no matter what you are. But I promise you will if you try any tricks."

WHEN he lifted the light, wasted figure, the man groaned and fainted. "It's better that way," muttered Brett, and slung him across his shoulder.

As he toiled up the trail, bent under the burden, he reflected it was a crazy thing he was doing, ministering to a man sent by Kershaw to kill him.

After awhile, the man's groan attested his return to consciousness. And then, between gasps of pain, he talked.

"I'm no good—not worth foolin' with. Never had a chance, never will. You see, I went to jail when I was a kid, for killin' a human snake. Served twenty years behind stone walls. But the real hell started when I got out. Nobody wanted truck with an ex-con. Only way I could eat was to steal. Then Kershaw give me a chance to make a stake. By then I'd have done anything. I was desperate, damn near starved. That's howcome me to miss you, Madison."

"Save your breath," ordered Brett. "You can't talk your way out of what you tried to do to me. You say you never had a chance. I'll give you one—a chance to work as hard as I work to live, shedding honest sweat, swinging an axe in these woods. If you refuse that, you don't deserve a chance."

The man sighed. "I reckon you're crazy," he muttered. "Nobody ever offered Link Ludlow nothin', let alone a man I tried to kill. I ain't hearin' right."

"Shut up!" rapped Brett. "I got no wind for gabbing if I'm going to tote you home."

After that there was no sound between them save the rasp of Brett's breath and the low, suppressed moans of the wounded man.

The sun had crossed the zenith when Brett slogged to the door of his cabin, jerked the latch string and carried his burden to the lone bunk. Link Ludlow was out again, for which Brett was thankful as he boiled water, cleaned the raw

wound and bound the man's injured side with strips cut from an old blanket.

"Best I could do with what I've got," he said when Link roused. "But it's good enough, barring infection. Gotta go out now, but I'll be back in three-four hours. Take it easy." He picked up the rifle. "I'll take this. Might knock over a deer. Venison won't do you no harm."

"Watch you don't have to use it on bigger game," said Link.

Brett paused. "Meaning what, exactly?"

"Can't tell you much, Madison. My orders was to knock you over, nothing more. But I know Kershaw's got other men on this bench."

"Why?"

"Don't know. I had orders to look 'em up."

Brett nodded, refilled the magazine and stepped outside. For a long minute he stood savoring the sweet, familiar balsam. It was good to get home. Yet peace seemed strangely gone from this timberland. The pine forest had suddenly become a place for ambush.

His glance swung to the edge of the bench, where piled logs awaited but a shove to hurl them down into Alder Gulch. At a dozen places along the rim similar piles were stacked, needing only skidding snow to be turned into money. He thought of the blasted hopes of the hard-pressed pool men—three winters of waiting for snow that hadn't come; struggling to survive, with a fortune in the hands of every man. Starvation Pool, timber men were calling them; busted shoestrings.

It had been desperation that had dictated the decision to build the haul road, a tremendous task, and one calling for an outlay for rolling stock and animals that the entire resources of the pool would not cover.

Now a narrow-gauge railroad was coming to them, without expense. Now Brett could dispel the gloom that had gripped the pool members, many of whom were

willing to take anything for their holdings. It gave Brett a fine sense of worthy accomplishment. He'd carry the word to the Cameron place first. Dan Cameron had been one of the hardest hit. And Sheila, Dan's snapping-eyed, flaxen-haired daughter—it did Brett's heart good to be able to tell her the good news.

AVOIDING the main wood's trail, he hurried through virgin timber stands. He was almost running when he burst into the Cameron clearing. The shout that welled to his lips died aborning as he slowed. Before the slab cabin, two men stood with three horses. Burly, bearded strangers, their scowling visages turned to him in swift appraisal. Each had a pistol stuck in his belt. They waited, stiff as statues, for him to come on.

Brett carried his rifle carelessly as he strode toward them, noting their wary stiffness, their chill unfriendliness. Passing them, he nodded noncommittally and continued on to the door, through which came the drone of voices. Brett knocked.

A faint footfall brought light to Brett's eyes. The panel swung open and Sheila stood there. But she was a different Sheila.

"Brett!" she gasped, and flicked a nervous glance back into the house. Her restraining palm pressed his chest when he would have moved past her. "Don't come in . . . please. I—I wish you hadn't come here."

Brett stared at her. "You . . . what?" he demanded, puzzled. "Why not? What's the matter, Sheila? What's wrong?"

"Sheila!" A man's voice struck from inside. "Who's there?"

The girl swallowed. "It's Brett, Dad. He's come back and—"

"Well, by God!"

A heavy tread shook the floor. A caloused hand caught Sheila, pulled her inside. Then blocky, stubble-faced Dan Cameron stood there, glaring at Brett

with undisguised scorn in his eyes.

"Madison—" he hammered his words with a stiff finger—"you got a hell of a nerve showing here. And now you're here, get out, you skunk! You're a stink in my nostrils!"

His rage and Brett's surprise carried them away from the door. Behind Cameron a man stepped from the entryway, slim, suave, smiling smugly, a leather dispatch case under his arm. His dress, bearing and scornful smile were but mirrors reflecting details of the room where Miles Kershaw jerked strings to control empires. Fear grew in Brett. He caught Cameron's arm desperately.

"Dan!" he pleaded. "Don't tell me you—you've sold."

"You bet I've sold," the man roared. "And I got my price, without handing most of it to a traitor. Take your dirty paws off me."

Brett felt weariness flow through him. He released his grip, shot a look at Sheila in the doorway. Her head was bowed, her hands busy holding back her brother, tow-headed Chips Cameron, who wanted to watch the excitement.

Brett shook his head. "Somebody's crazy," he said. "You sold out, Dan. Now all the others will follow your lead. Who does that make a traitor?"

"One minute!" The man with the dispatch case stepped forward. "The White Falls Bank has bought out the Pool, Madison. Every parcel—for cash. I'm John Ackerson, bank agent. We've paid the generous sum of two thousand dollars a quarter section, present holders retaining title to all but the timber. You're the only one I haven't a quit-claim from."

"You lousy crook!" raged Brett, moving toward him. "You pay two thousand dollars a quarter section, when there's that much cut timber waiting to be hauled from every claim? You—"

"Hold it, feller!" A burly man stepped out from the horses, his pistol at full cock.

"Don't talk outta turn around here or you'll get your head blown off!"

"Please . . . Brett!" Sheila was begging, from the doorway.

THE bank agent sneered. "Sounds good, you calling me a crook, Madison. I suppose all men are crooks who don't play your game. Mister Kershaw prefers the honest way, that's why he refused your offer to deliver him the Storm Bench timber at two thousand, of which you stated you intended to give these people five hundred."

"That's the figger he used," spat Dan Cameron. "The snake!"

Brett went bitter. Five hundred was the figure he had used to point his argument, when advising trying for a loan to build a hauling road. Kershaw's agent had picked it up and made stock of it. And now he was clinching it.

"It's been difficult, Madison, showing these fine people they've trusted a crook. But Mister Kershaw decided they must know. He was big enough to offer you the same price as the rest, though he doubted you'd ever return to face your friends."

"That's why he tried to kill me twice, eh?" flared Brett.

"Oh, come now!" said Ackerson, smiling deprecatingly.

Brett turned to Cameron. "I'm sorry for for you, Dan," he said. "Except for Sheila, I'd allow you got what was coming to you for having so little faith in me. Kershaw tried to murder me, because I wouldn't play his game. The last time he tried was not over two hours ago. You let this Ackerson convince you I'm a liar and a traitor. You swallowed his lies about the honesty of Miles Kershaw. Well, let me tell you something Ackerson didn't." He shot a hateful glance at the scowling bank agent.

"Ackerson didn't tell you Pat Brodie will soon start building a narrow-gauge railroad past Storm Bench, financed by

the bank and tapping Great Western holdings. Didn't know that, did you? When Kershaw learned I'd overheard the deal, he offered me twenty-five thousand and a fine job with Great Western to keep my mouth shut and let him have his way on Storm Bench. Well, it's all true. Within a month, engines will be hauling logs from this bench. And you boys will sit here and eat up your two thousand while you wait for worthless stump farms. Oh, what's the use? The harm's done."

He flung one last glance at Sheila, shook his head and turned away. No one spoke. No sound came until the timber swallowed him. Then a laugh; gloating, triumphant peals from John Ackerson and his two henchmen.

Brett's anger cooled as he strode on. He had been gone so long the simple, earthy pool men had come to doubt him, and were fertile ground for Kershaw's lies. Honest themselves, they trusted all men instinctively. That trust had ruined them. Kershaw was clever. It had been easy for him and that glib, suave agent of his to convince them.

Brett was entering his own clearing when the three horsemen came galloping up behind him—John Ackerson and his two gunmen. All were grinning. Brett waited before his stoop, watching them draw rein and swing down.

"Madison," said the agent, "you've caused us lots of trouble, but it got you nothing." He opened his case, withdrew a sheaf of papers. "Here's a quit-claim for your property, Madison. Sign on the dotted line and I'll hand you five hundred in gold. It's all your place is worth, considering the expense your crazy stubbornness has caused us." There was a sneer on the agent's face.

"Five hundred, eh?" Brett said hoarsely. "And if I don't sign?"

"The pay is in lead," said Ackerson. "God made you too stubborn to have it any other way. Pay him off, boys!"

Chapter IV

WAY OF A KILLER

ACKERSON'S gunmen had Brett in pincers, one on his right, the other on his left. They were both drawing, and Brett knew he was doomed. Sudden hate dispelled his weariness and lit his will to fight. He swerved, leveled his rifle and let fly. The smash of the heavy bullet blasted one gunman back, dumping him suddenly on the wet ground.

Swinging, Brett felt the breath of the second gunman's bullet, saw Ackerson's weapon whipping from under his arm. The man's face was contorted as he bawled orders to the other. Brett's second slug took him center. Ackerson dropped his leather case. His knees buckled and he pitched face down.

Brett spun to face the third gunman, who had shot once . . . and missed. He saw the weapon coming down for the finishing shot, knew he was too far behind. This was the end. He braced himself for bullet shock. Then the gunman shuddered, sagged. His weapon spatted against the earth and he fell shapelessly. The echo of a gun-blast ran out through the timber.

Astonished, Brett looked toward the cabin. There was a hint of vapor at the open window. He leaped to the door and inside. Link Ludlow lay as before, flat on his back, eyes closed, breathing regularly. But the acrid fumes of powder were plain on the air.

Brett strode to the bunk, threw back the blankets. Link's pistol, left by Brett on the table, was gripped in the man's hand. Link's eyes came open and a broad grin twisted his lips.

"Hello, feller," he said. "Back already?"

"You shoot that man?" Brett demanded bleakly.

Link's grin faded. "What if I did? No need to get sore about it. He had you cold, didn't he? It was him or you, an'

I didn't owe him one damned thing."

Brett shook his head. "You take the cake, Ludlow. Couple hours ago you try to kill me; now you kill a man to save my life. Those three were working for the one who paid you to beef me. It don't make sense."

Link, embarrassed, plucked nervously at the blanket. "Couple of hours ago you had the chance to kill me, Madison. Instead, you toted me here an' made me comfortable. You offered me a job of honest work, like I was a human being instead of a wolf. You even left me here with a gun on the table, giving me another chance at you. That's trust, Madison, an' not even a snake would fang back at it."

Brett nodded. "It's good to know my trust wasn't misplaced, Link. Right now it would be easy for me to doubt every man in this cock-eyed world. Can you go clear through for me on this deal, feller?"

"As how, Brett?"

"Face the law and attest I killed these men in self-defense? Can you do that without—"

Link grinned slyly. "If you can take it to the law, Brett, I reckon I can add my ten cents. For all the weight they'll give the word of a man who's served time."

Brett sat down, thinking it over. "There's something to what you say, Link," he admitted gloomily. "If we tell the truth about this, who will believe us, especially with my own people doubting me? It might be the cue for the law to jump on you again. No, we'll have to watch our step." He turned abruptly, went out to look upon the gruesome scene of death.

A BREEZE, moaning dirge-like through the tall pine tops, toyed with the sheaf of papers clutched in John Ackerson's dead hand. The rattle of them stirred something in Brett's brain. He took them from the agent's unfeeling grasp, ran over them. They were quit-claims, signed by members of the Storm Bench Timber

Pool; deeds obtained by guile and treachery.

Stuffing them into his shirt, Brett cast a nervous look into the darkening timbers, shouldered the dead men, one by one, and carried them into his tool shed behind the cabin. Then he looped the reins of the three horses and stirred them into an alarmed gallop from the clearing. Having freed the yard of all signs of the killing, he re-entered the cabin, laid John Ackerson's dispatch case on the table and made a light.

"Now you can't go to the law," Link complained. "I once had a cell mate who was servin' time because he didn't have sense enough to let the lamented lay until the law could case up the killing. You should have—"

Brett said, "I'm not letting the law in on this, Link. It would mean everything to lose and nothing to gain."

"You're telling me," snorted Link. "A good idea, if you can make it work. Kershaw will spare no expense to find them corpses; that's a bet. They'll trace 'em here, sure as shootin'. And if they find 'em, we'll be charged with murder."

"They won't find 'em," Brett vowed grimly. Sorting the papers from the leather case, he told Link the story of the struggle of the Storm Bench Pool, and how Kershaw had conspired to defeat them and make millions from his treachery.

"You see, Link," he finished, "if I tell the law, Kershaw will get these deeds—and the pool will be licked. I can't let that happen. If the disappearance of these agents remains a mystery, the pool members will still own their timber holdings and, by cutting logs, can save the railroad for Pat Brodie. Everybody will win . . . except Kershaw."

"It's worth the gamble," admitted Link, and fell silent.

Brett made a fire in the stove, burned the dispatch case and most of the papers. The deeds he hid securely and then got

supper. Brett smoked a pipe and washed the dishes. The weight of the necessary decision seemed to depress both men, and they brooded silently.

Presently, without a word, Brett went outside, took pick and shovel from the tool house and lost himself in the timber. An hour later he was back to carry the bodies, one by one, and deposit them in a grave lost in pine slashing. When he finished replacing the earth, tamping it and hiding all evidence of the excavation with leaf mold and litter, it was midnight. He felt like a criminal when he went back to the house, to find Link asleep.

Turning in, weary from his labors and shaken from the rigors of the past days, Brett found himself wakeful, worried about Link. The ex-convict held a powerful weapon against him. Kershaw would pay Ludlow well for the information he held, information that would ruin the pool and send Brett to prison. Brett had to admit he had been a fool. Troubled and frightened, he fell asleep.

LINK LUDLOW'S restlessness awoke Brett at dawn. The wizened man was better and insisted on getting up. As he ate breakfast, it was plain he had something on his mind. Having lighted his pipe, he came out with it.

"It won't work, Brett," he blurted. "You've fouled your nest."

"What you mean, Link?"

"Done some thinkin' last night. Cachin' the evidence will bounce back an' lick you."

Brett stared at him. "How come?"

"Railroad construction won't start till Kershaw gets those deeds. I heard him say so. He's paid for these leases an' he'll have 'em. Anybody who knows Kershaw will tell you that. He'll send other agents up here to have the pool men sign duplicate quit-claims. If they won't sign, it'll mean war an' killings. He'll make 'em glad to sign over their timber."

Brett drew his hand across his eyes. There was wisdom in Link's prophecy. Kershaw would make plenty of trouble before the last chapter was written, and none more vital than halting the building of the narrow-gauge.

"To hell with the railroad!" he ground out. "Each pool man has two thousand dollars. It adds up to a tidy sum that will buy rolling stock and build a haul road."

Link grunted. "It's an idea. But the law will be mighty interested in where you got that money. Specially when it adds up to the sum lost with the missing agents. Think about that."

Brett was thinking of nothing else. His scheme had looked iron-clad, yet in a few moments Link had shot it full of holes. It looked as though he had dug the pool's grave last night.

"You're a great help, Link," he said tartly. "You've done a great job of thinking us into ruin. See if you can dream out a way for us to beat Kershaw."

The man's head was down, his eyes narrowed in thought. "What I'm doin' right now," he grunted.

Link lay around all day, pacing, restless, muttering to himself. Supper time saw him drawn, sunken-eyed and nervous from his mental efforts. He was snappish, ugly, like a different man, when he crawled into bed. Next morning, when Brett awoke, Link's bunk was empty. The man gone!

For the first time in his life, Brett knew real fear. Those hidden graves out yonder haunted him. The papers, which he had believed held salvation for the harried members of the pool, seemed crying in agonized voices for Kershaw to find them.

Chapter V

WHEN A MAN NEEDS A SADDLEMATE

BRETT'S first impulse was to call it quits, make up a pack and lose himself in the timber. His usefulness on the

bench seemed at an end. He had given his best, trying to be fair and honest with his brother pool members. And now, to a man, they hated him. Even Sheila believed him a traitor. And Link had nothing but scorn for him, an unwillingness to trust even his uncertain future with the man who had saved him. Brett's entire future looked damned black.

For a long time, Brett stood beside Link's bunk, numb, lonely, seeing nothing. Bitterness etched new lines on his face, drew his lips down in an ugly curve. And out of his hopelessness and futile anger came a determination to reward the harsh judgment of the pool men with one last good turn—before he quit the woods.

Grim-faced, he went outside to the chopping block, beneath which he had cached the deeds. And there he receipted for another blow. The hole was empty, the deeds gone. Link Ludlow had not been too sick to spy upon his benefactor's movements and rob him. This explained his absence. He was taking the deeds to Miles Kershaw, selling out the pool for a handful of silver, and buying immunity, perhaps, by revealing the fate of Kershaw's agents. Terrible urgency shook Brett and he broke down the trail at a loping run.

"Better not rest on your head-start, you buzzard," he flung ahead. "I spared you once because I thought you were a man. Now all I want is to fix my sights on your filthy carcass."

His tireless legs flung back the miles along the woods trail. He saved a mile by quitting the switchbacks for a reckless slide into the canyon bottom. There, in the moist earth, he picked up Link's fresh tracks. Tracks that would lead to the kill!

With fresh eagerness, Brett drove himself on. Along about mid-forenoon he debouched from the mouth of Alder Gulch and raced across the three-mile flat toward Pinedale. His strength was failing and he had to call on his reserves to maintain the pace those last few miles. But he had no

glimpse of Link and knew he had lost. A train was just pulling into the village.

At the edge of Pinedale, Brett halted, breathing hard. From here, beside the railroad track, he had an unobstructed view of the town. No hurrying figure gladdened his eye. Link had made it. A shrill whistle, a clanging bell and a puff of smoke. The morning passenger local, eastbound, crawled out of Pinedale, gathering speed. And Brett knew Link Ludlow was aboard.

FOR bitter moments, Brett stood looking after the train, until it was only a smudge over a timbered ridge. A strong sense of defeat was on him. Everything he touched seemed to go to pieces. The faint echo of the train whistle came back. And it stung Brett. It was like Link's sneering taunt.

Shoulders bent with the burden of failure, Brett turned dejectedly back, dragging the rifle stock, shuffling like an old, spiritless man. He was licked. What a fool he had been to think he could beat Kershaw at this sort of game.

It took him a long time to make the return trip. He walked like a man in a dream. Hours passed. The sun climbed to the zenith, began its downward swing. Link Ludlow would be in White Falls by now, closing his crooked bargain. The pool was washed up.

Dusk had darkened the forest when Brett stepped into his own clearing and approached his cabin. He was nearing the door when he saw a figure rise from the stoop. He stopped dead still, his rifle leveling, the hammer clicking back.

"It's me, Brett! Sheila!" The feminine hail made him feel foolish.

"Sheila!" echoed Brett, and lowered the gun. Divorced from his will, his feet moved him forward. Excitement ran riot in him. It seemed to him in this moment that his every action during the past few weeks had been taken for this girl and not for the pool. How could he tell her? She

came to him, frantically caught his arms.

"Thank God, Brett! I've been afraid for you. I thought maybe you'd gone . . . for good."

Brett leaned his rifle against the cabin wall, drew her into his arms without daring to look at her.

"Not yet," he murmured. "But—but there's nothing left."

She freed herself, stepped back and made him look at her. "Listen, Brett. Once you said nothing could come between us. Have you forgotten? Maybe I'm shameless, coming to you like this, but I can't let you leave, thinking I share their distrust of you. I don't, Brett. I believe in you. I don't understand, but I've kept faith with you . . . all the way. Is failure to get a loan and not being able to match a tricky banker going to spoil things for you and me?"

Brett gasped, stood staring at her as if unable to believe his senses. Then he no-

ticed, for the first time, her blanket-wrapped bundle on the stoop.

"You mean—" he blurted out. "You still see some good in me? You will still marry me?"

"Of course." Then, as if his doubt frightened her: "Don't—don't you want me, Brett?"

"Want you?" Brett drew her close, crushing her against him. "I want you more than I want to live, Sheila. But it's no use. I've ruined everything and couldn't marry if I wanted to." He released her, stood back, downcast and hopeless. "I wish—I wish you hadn't come, Sheila."

"Don't, Brett!" She was pleading. "Failure here is not ruin. You can start again somewhere else, and I'll help. As for what dad and the rest think, what do we care? We have our own lives to live, our own plans to make. Don't, Brett! Don't look like that."

Brett wagged his head dolefully, clench-

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ing and unclenching his long fingers. "It's too late to live our own lives, Sheila," he said flatly. "The law will have its say about the way I live mine."

"The law, Brett? Why?"

HE FORCED her down upon the stoop, hunkered before her. Then, starting with his entry into Kershaw's office, he told her all that had happened since, right down to the bitter end.

"So you see, Sheila," he finished, "I'm no bargain for a girl like you. I'll be wanted for murder when Link tells what he knows, and Kershaw will never rest until he sees me dead. I'll be on the run, and I can't be hobbled with a wife."

He had painted an ugly picture purposely, taking no pains to gloss it over. He braced himself for her scorn. But the hand she laid on his arm was warmly sympathetic, and in her eyes was a look of devotion.

"Don't forget that I can run, too, Brett," she argued. "Nor that it will be anything but a terribly lonely trail for you, without me. Don't travel it alone. Take me with you."

"No, Sheila!" The tone of finality in his voice was unanswerable. "At least I won't have that on my conscience. When they catch me, you need never know. You will forget about me in time and. . ."

He paused as she got up, turning her face and leaving him staring mutely at her pitifully slumped shoulders. Brett's every fibre screamed for him to hold her, to tell her he hadn't meant what he had said. But a greater force ruled him.

Tonelessly, he said, "Come, Sheila. You better get home before your father—"

"I have no home, Brett," she choked. "I told dad I was coming here, and we had words. He wouldn't see it my way. He told me if I left the house never to come back. That's the way it is. He's proud and so am I. I made my choice, Brett, and now. . ."

She reached for her bundle. Brett took it from her hands.

"You win, Sheila," he said. "God help us. It may last a day, a week or a year. Who knows?"

"If only for an hour," she breathed, "it will be worth it. They can't take that away. We'll fight together, Brett, guns with guns, fire with fire and lies with lies. If we fail, it won't be running."

For one proud moment, Brett stood looking down at her. Then, with a shaky laugh, he tossed her bundle into the cabin, caught up his rifle. "Come!" he commanded.

"Brett!" she gasped, frightened by his manner. "Where?"

"To Pinedale, Sheila, before we change our minds."

"But Brett, you've been there and back. Forty miles in one day is—"

"Good training for fast and far traveling," he said grimly. "Right now I can make a hundred miles. Come on, let's get going."

A WEEK later they stood again at the edge of Brett's clearing. It had been a week Brett was never to forget, a week he wished he could have stretched into a lifetime. But cruel shadows dogged him. He had a fight to make, a fight more grimly necessary now than before.

What little money they had needed came from Sheila's pocket. It had sufficed to pay the preacher and buy the food they needed during their stay at a remote mountain lake. Now, having just returned, they looked upon a scene vastly different from that of seven days ago.

The clearing teemed with activity. At the far edge, packers unloaded a long mule train. A pole corral held scores of work animals, and everywhere were piled tools and equipment necessary to a grading camp. Brodie was pushing the narrow gauge through.

The realization brought only bitterness to Brett. "Here it is, Sheila," he said tight-

ly. "The thing we all prayed for. The thing that could have saved us all if the pool had had faith in me. But now it's too late, honey. Kershaw owns our timber. We're out. It's an old story and, like always, the little fellow loses because he's not organized."

"Kershaw may own the bulk of the pool timber, Brett," she corrected. "But he'll never get yours. And remember, you've done nothing that wasn't right and just before God. We must have faith so strong we can whip Kershaw and all his money."

"What a girl!" Brett said, and pressed her hand.

As they threaded through the maze of activity, more than one brawny workman pausing to stare admiringly at Sheila. It was plain the camp was just being established. And it was equally plain that Brett's house had been entered. Smoke boiled from the chimney and, as they neared, a man came through the door, a roll of maps under his arm. So Brett was not entirely unprepared to find Pat Brodie seated at the table.

The railroad builder raised his eyes from his plans. He saw the girl and bounced up, clawing off his hat.

Brett laughed. "What's wrong, Brodie? See a ghost?"

"Madison!" he gasped. "Faith, an' I heard ye were dead this long time."

"Exaggeration, Brodie," said Brett.

"You're roight," growled the Irishman. "What's your business, me bucko? I'm a busy man."

"My first business is to move you and *your* business outside, Brodie," said Brett. "Missus Madison here will start housekeeping when the excess baggage is out of the way."

Brodie bridled. "Faith, an' I'm told Mister Kershaw owns this place, me bye. I must take his word, the foine gentleman, before yours. Be playzed to get your own self out."

Brett, moving fast, caught Brodie by the

nape of the neck and the seat of his pants, lifted him bodily and heaved him through the door. He bounced up with a roar, charged back, only to go down in a heap as the gear Brett threw after him struck him in the chest. Men came running, pausing excitedly about Brodie, who sat on his haunches, staring first at Brett, then at Sheila, as they stood side by side in the doorway.

"Better not make trouble, Brodie," warned Brett. "Kershaw lied to you and you'll save gunplay by believing it. This is my home and I'll fight for it. But if you want to be stubborn about it, it's okay."

Brodie rose, brushed off his clothes. "I'm checkin' with the bank again, bucko," he growled. "If Kershaw can show a deed to this place, I'll run ye one-legged on these side hills. If Kershaw lied, I'll be after apologizing to ye and yer lady. Yes, begorra, I'll be after payin' ye rent for the use of your land."

"Fair enough, Brodie. Might take the rent out in trade—hauling those logs yonder."

Brodie scowled. "A right thought, bucko, but no go. I've give my word not to haul a log, except for Great Western, for two years."

He strode off, ordering his men away. Brett smiled at his wife. "For all his fight, there's hope in his word, pardner. Kershaw can't show a deed. And Brodie will be glad to haul logs when he finds Kershaw is a liar. He don't know yet he'll be double-crossed by Great Western. Our logs can't save him, but the pool could . . . if there was a pool. And as for me cutting—" He looked away bleakly. "When Kershaw finds where I am. . . ."

Sheila tossed her head defiantly. "I'm interested in cleaning out our cabin right now, Brett. Let's cross Kershaw's bridge when we come to it. Lend me a hand."

And Brett did, ashamed of burdening her with a future that looked like doom in funeral clothes.

Chapter VI

PACKAGE OF HELL

SOMETIME during the night Brett reared up in bed, shaking the sleep from his eyes. Outside, the camp was quiet, save for the occasional stomping of mules in the corral. Sheila slept on, breathing easily. Brett was relaxing, damning his nerves, when he heard a repetition of the faint sound which had awakened him. It was a scratching on the door, like the claws of an animal—or the nails of a man's fingers.

Careful not to awaken or frighten Sheila, Brett eased out of the bed, found his rifle and cat-footed to the door. He opened the panel a crack. The dark shape of a man lay draped across the stoop. He was barely conscious. Even as Brett stared, clawed fingers scraped on the planking, trying vainly to drag the body forward.

Brett lay aside his weapon, knelt beside the body. It was Link. He lifted him, bore him to a bunk.

He was making a light when Sheila's whisper came. "Brett, what is it?"

"Get up, Sheila," he ordered. "Dress and heat some water."

Brett went back to the all but unconscious man, loosened his clothes. Sheila's white face hung over his shoulder as he revealed the clotted wounds.

"Who is it?" she breathed.

"Link Ludlow," said Brett. "The crook who stole the deeds. He's come back . . . dying."

While he worked, Sheila made a fire and blanketed the windows against prying eyes. With a basin of hot water and clean cloths, Brett sponged the three fresh wounds. These on top of the one barely healed, where Brett had shot him! Link was in a bad way, bleached white from bleeding. But his heart beat staunchly and his fever was not high. There was still a chance, and Brett prayed for it, as he bandaged the hurts.

Presently Link's lids fluttered open. For an instant the wild fire of fear flared in his sunken eyes. Then, as recognition came, a look of relief crossed his pallid features. He tried to smile.

Words came, barely audible. "I made 'er, pardner! I got back! How, I dunno."

"Didn't expect a welcoming committee, did you?" Brett asked grimly. "You left a smell behind you, feller."

The rattle in Link's throat might have been a laugh. "Can't say I blame you, Brett, seein' I didn't do no explainin'. But it was the only way I saw, an' I done what I figgered best to get the narrow gauge started. The deeds was the things, Brett, so I took 'em."

Brett nodded. "You mean Kershaw wouldn't let Brodie start until he saw the quit-claims? That it?"

Link smiled weakly. "That's it. So I took him the deeds, told him Ackerson sent 'em in, while him and his mates worked on you. He fell for it, ordered Brodie to start work. And then . . . with construction under way. . . ." He gasped, twisted with pain and went limp.

FIVE minutes later he roused again, caught at Brett's hand. "I didn't rob you, kid," he muttered. "Not after the way you treated me. But I knew you wouldn't give me the deeds."

"Why should I?" demanded Brett. "You've wiped the pool out."

"No, I ain't," whispered Link. "With things started, I stole 'em back. In the lining of my coat, pardner. I ate lead to get 'em, but—but what the hell." His eyes were closing.

"Link, for God's sake!" Shocked by the man's sacrifice, Brett went to his knees beside the man, fumbled in the torn coat lining and drew out the papers. They were stained with Link's life blood. For a long moment he knelt there, staring into that pale face, unable to speak over the lump in his throat.

The rattle sounded in Link's throat again. Then: "Don't feel bad about cussin' me, feller. It's all right. I wasn't no good, an' you knew it. Better burn them papers, 'cause the man caught with those deeds will swing for murderin' Glendon. Yeah, I had to kill him. Funny thing, that crook was robbin' Kershaw's safe, trying to grab this timber for himself."

"He shoot you, Link?"

"Yeah. God knows how I got away an' made it here. I can't remember. They tore down timber lookin' for me. Still are. Always will be. Let 'em!" He laughed crazily. "I'll croak now an' fool the lot of them."

"No, you won't," Brett vowed huskily. "You've earned the thanks of every man and woman on the Bench. You'll live to hear it spoken."

"Naw!" scoffed Link. "An' no loss. If you're caught shieldin' me, you'll hang with me. So long, feller. . . . Bury me deep."

His words trailed off and for a minute Brett thought the little ex-convict dead. But Link's heart still was beating.

Brett rose to stare helplessly at Sheila. "What can I do, girl? Link's right. If they find him here we'll be in bad trouble. And yet—"

"Burn the deeds, as he told you," said the practical Sheila. "If they find him here, they'll find us with him. We can't let him down, no matter what the cost, can we?"

"No," said Brett, dropping the papers into the stove. "We can't."

ALL that night and the next day, Brett and Sheila kept close to the cabin. Link raved and shouted in his delirium. The confusion of the camp dimmed the noise, though many a face was turned toward the house. And once Brodie came over to ask if anything was wrong. Brett forced a grin and shook his head, feeling like a man trapped in a powder barrel, with a fuse sputtering and crackling toward him.

All that time, Sheila worked over the babbling man, dripping water onto his parched tongue, allaying his fever with wet packs. On the second night Link fell into a quiet sleep and Sheila tumbled into bed, worn out. She had made life possible for Link.

Next morning Link still slept deeply. After breakfast, Brett went outside to sit on the stoop and smoke. Sheila joined him, her eyes a little fearful, her brow furrowed. Their thoughts were heavy and confused, not easily put into words. Link lay in there fighting for his life. He alone had saved the bacon of the pool men, yet his discovery by the law might doom them all as accessories after the facts of robbery and murder.

The construction crew moved from the camp with their mules. From a distance came the spaced blasts of dynamite shots. Then, through the banging of pans by the cook in the cooktent, a confused mumbling of voices came from the timber. It roused Brett. He knocked the doddle from his pipe and rose, staring. Moving forms showed through the trees—figures that moved forward steadily.

Sheila grabbed his arm. "Look!" she gasped. "It's dad . . . Bill Southern . . . Angus. The pool men."

Brett stood stiff, silent and pale as Dan Cameron led the group into the clearing. Cold-eyed, he watched them halt to take in the untidy litter of the grading camp and listen to the sounds of axes, scrapers and teamsters' curses filtering in from afar. The looks they flung at the pair on the cabin porch were chill and brief and unfriendly.

Brett stole a look at Sheila, standing so rigid and white. "Nice folks," he said tartly.

"Why not tell them about the deeds?" she murmured. "They're so wrong."

"No!" he clipped. "Not yet. Let them suffer. Let them realize fully what their doubting has cost them. There'll be plenty

of time, later, to tell them they're going to share in the railroad's harvest. Let 'em sweat for awhile."

Silence came between them. And into that silence intruded the beat of horses' hoofs and the jingle of trappings. Presently three men came riding into the clearing.

Brett drew a hard breath. "Kershaw!" he said. "And the Pinedale sheriff."

"Brett, what will we do?" Sheila was frightened.

Brett shook his head. "Wait and see how the game goes," he said bleakly. "This may be the beginning of the end, but we

HE CAUGHT up his rifle, slung it casually across his arm. Pat Brodie came walking into the camp and went into a huddle with Kershaw, the sheriff and his deputy. Brett watched them and the pool men watched them. Brodie was pointing toward the house, arguing. The distance was too great for Brett to make out the words, but he saw Brodie suddenly shake his fist under the banker's nose and whirl away. Kershaw glowered after him like a brooding buzzard. Then, after a word from Kershaw, the trio moved toward the grouped pool men across the clearing.

Brett was surprised at that. He had expected Kershaw to level on him, rather than brace the pool men. Kershaw drew rein before Dan Cameron, lit down. The harsh sounds of heated argument floated across to Brett, and he walked over to get into it. Better that than chance their discovery of Link.

As he approached them, Kershaw was hedging. "Ahem-m, I mean to say, gentlemen, you've no real kick coming. A coincidence, the railroad building up here at this time. Had no idea of it myself. I . . . er . . . you were paid generously and—"

"Generous, hell!" bawled Big Bill Southern, of the pool. "You robbed us, Kershaw. You've taken advantage of us, and

now you get rich on what we slaved for."

"For a ten cent piece, I'd horsewhip you into the Gulch," growled Dan Cameron.

The muttering pool men pressed forward, and Sheriff Ben Haney warned them back. "Take it easy, boys. I know your disappointment. But you sold out, and that's that. You didn't have to take Kershaw's money."

"Of course not," Kershaw said piously. "Try to deal honestly with men and they . . . er . . . turn against you. Gratitude is dead." He turned, shooting a malevolent glance at Brett. "These pool men don't

refused to deal with the entirely honest with them. ~~On the~~ it had been left to Madison, they'd each have five hundred dollars for their holdings. And he would have had as much from each of them."

"You lie, Kershaw!" Brett spoke softly. "The beginning of the truth ain't in you." There was more he would have said, much more. But the uselessness of it held him silent. Kershaw had fed them what they wanted to hear. He had split the pool wide open and turned their hatred from himself. He felt the impact of their hate himself now. Even Sheriff Haney was staring savagely at him, with an expression of loathing.

Kershaw threw up his hands. "Boys, I want to be fair. I can understand how you feel cheated about this railroad. Well, I'm a fair man. Suppose I tear up the old quit-claims. You write out new ones and I'll raise the ante a thousand dollars. What do you say?"

Silence held them as they weighed the offer. Brett felt a surge of grudging admiration for the man. He was clever—devilishly clever. Faced with the loss of his title to these timberlands, he was playing his bob-tailed flush pat. And Brett could see the effect of his apparent generosity working on the pool men. Here was Kershaw, they thought, with all the aces, offer-

ing to give them another thousand dollars apiece, despite his lack of obligation in the matter.

Only Big Bill Southern rebelled. "Another thousand!" he sneered. "That's nothing. You've got a fortune on every one of these claims. We've got nothing. Big hearted, ain't you?"

Kershaw shrugged. "I'm . . . er . . . sorry you feel like that, my friend. But perhaps it's better to let it ride as it is. I've got title, and you apparently don't want my money."

The pool men looked askance at one another. And Dan Cameron, their leader, flushed hotly. "Bill Southern talked out of turn, Kershaw. The rest of us are grateful for your offer, I'm sure. And we accept it. No use adding to our hard luck. What you want us to do?"

KERSHAW flung a triumphant glance at Brett. He expanded visibly. "Er . . . that's better, gentlemen. I'll return to Pinedale and have new papers drawn. Suppose we meet here tomorrow noon and close the deal. I want you to be my friends, and this money will be well spent if it brings complete understanding and mutual confidence."

Brett stood frozen, like a man in chains. He wanted to cry out to them that they were being crucified. But he dared not speak. To even hint that Kershaw was without a vestige of title to the Bench lands would of necessity mean a confession that he had burned the quit-claims, that he harbored the killer of Glendon.

What a strange game this was. He dared not reveal the weak point in Kershaw's scheme, for fear of prison. And Kershaw didn't dare bring up the matter of the disappearance of his agents—though it must be foremost in his mind—lest he reveal that his play was a bluff. Yet, once he had new quit-claims, he would unleash the law against them all, forcing them to prove that they were innocent of killing a man

to steal the original quit-claims.

The pool men, having agreed to the meeting, were turning away when Brett, sick at heart, let his temper get away.

"You'll not meet on my claim, Kershaw," he exploded. "Get off now and stay off. You may fool the rest of these men into signing away their rights, but you've not fooled me. Get off!"

Kershaw flushed, appealed to the sheriff. Haney looked surprised.

"What's this mean, Kershaw? Don't you own this claim, too?"

"No . . . er . . . no, Sheriff. This is the only one I don't control. I—"

"Then you'll have to obey his order to get off," said the lawman. "Hold your meeting somewhere else."

"At my place," spoke up Dan Cameron. "This blackguard won't bother us there."

Kershaw bowed. "That's . . . er . . . satisfactory, Cameron. This time tomorrow, then." He turned smouldering eyes to Brett. "I can't understand your attitude, Madison, but I feel sorry for you. Your faithlessness has poisoned you. Well . . . er . . . good day, gentlemen."

He reined his horse about, started away. The pool men were moving into the timber.

"Wait!" Brett begged. "Wait, Cameron. Listen to me!" They hurried on and Brett started after them.

Sheriff Ben Haney flung his pony across Brett's path. "Hold it, you young fool. Stand where you are! Your neighbors want no part of you, so let them alone. From all the signs, this kind of hate breeds murder."

"You said it, Sheriff," said Dan Cameron. "I'll make his wife a widow if he gets in my way. He's done all the harm he's going to."

The timber swallowed them and Brett turned back to his cabin, heavy footed, heartsick in the face of an avalanche sweeping them all to ruin. For himself, he didn't care. But he thought of Sheila. Because of him she was estranged from her family, under the shadow of lawlessness and in real

danger of becoming a widow before the new quit-claims were signed. For, despite their hate, the pool men must be told. Despite the deadly danger to himself, he must inform them of Kershaw's desperate bluff.

Chapter VII

THE TRAP IS SPRUNG

SHEILA waited for him in the doorway, her eyes starry with tears. "I heard, Brett," she said. "Kershaw is robbing them again, and dad is so stubborn. . . ."

She broke off, sobbing against his chest. He stroked her hair, brooding.

"He's blind, honey," he murmured. "They all are. Nobody can help them but me, and I don't know if they'll listen. I'm going to your father's home. He's got to know the truth before tomorrow."

She caught her breath. "He—he threatened you, Brett. Maybe I'd better go."

"Brett . . . come here!" Link's weak voice sounded from inside. They went in and found Link trying to raise himself, his face contorted with pain and alarm.

"Brett," he choked, "you're a fool for keeping me here. If they find me, your goose is cooked."

Brett pushed him down. "Take it easy, Link. Long as you keep still they won't find you. Kershaw and the Pinedale sheriff passed within a hundred yards just now, and they're none the wiser. Kershaw was worried about title to these claims and he's found a way." He told the wounded man of the banker's bluff. "I've got to stop that steal, Link, let the chips fall where they will. But how about you?"

"Do what you have to do, pardner," grinned Link, "without worryin' over me. You've patched up my carcass twice. If you can make use of what's left, have at it."

Brett glowered. "Damned if I will, Link. You've done more than your share already, paying in blood for the rest of us. No, I'll

pass on the truth and then we'll see what's what."

He slapped the wounded man playfully, took Sheila in his arms and kissed her. She tried to argue him into letting her go, but he laid his palm over her lips. In him was a fear of Dan Cameron's anger against the daughter he had disowned. He stepped outside, not daring a backward look lest his courage fail. Too well he knew this might be his last farewell to his bride. But the thing had grown bigger than any one man, or one woman.

He was halfway across the clearing when Sheila's voice reached him: "Brett! Come back! You forgot your gun!"

Brett only tossed his hand and continued on, well aware he had left the rifle behind. It wasn't in him to use it on Dan Cameron, Sheila's father. Or any of the others, for that matter. A gun was a symbol of conflict. Without one, there was the chance they could be made to listen.

BRETT'S hope he would find Dan Cameron alone was blasted when he stepped from the timber before the Cameron house. All the pool members were there, sprawled against the cabin front, arguing Kershaw's offer. At sight of him, all talk stopped.

Brett advanced slowly. Then Dan Cameron had bounced up, howling.

"It's Madison! Of all the unadulterated gall!" He whirled, darted into the cabin, emerging immediately with a rifle in his hands. "Now you traitor, I warned you!"

"Easy, Dan," Brett cautioned him, lifting his hands. "I'm not armed. Don't forget they still hang men for murder."

"Damn your soul!" raged Cameron. "You're on my land. Get off! You hear me?"

Brett kept moving forward. "I came to talk, men, and you'll listen. Everybody knows this is Kershaw's land. And he's not here to keep me off. Shoot me if you have to, but wait till I tell you how you've been swindled by a crook."

"Yah! I wouldn't believe the dying statement of a coyote like you."

"Shut up, Dan!" That was Big Bill Southern. "Let the rat talk."

Their muttering ceased. Brett was within a rod of them, when Chips Cameron, Sheila's kid brother, came hurtling around the cabin. "You devil!" he screamed. "Where you got my sister?"

His arm rocked and he hurled an egg-sized rock. Brett tried vainly to avoid it. It smacked him on the neck, under the ear. He went down, dazed.

He heard Dan Cameron yell, "Good boy, Chips!" and saw him charging. He rose, drove his fist into the man's belly. Then they swarmed over him.

"Get him! Beat the big devil to a pulp. Pay him off!"

They were kicking him, pounding him. There was no chance to fight back, no chance to say the thing he had come here to say. They swarmed all over him, and his senses flickered under the punishment. Thanks to the savagery of a boy, they were fully aroused. There was no telling how far they would go. Desperately, Brett pleaded with them.

"Wait, you fools! Give me a chance to—"

"Kill him!" roared Dan Cameron. "Pay him off!"

A rock-like fist bounced off Brett's jaw. He felt his consciousness slipping. He got his right hand free, smashed a snarling face before him. Then they had him pinned tightly. Blows rained on him, smothering him, filling him with sickening pain. His brain seemed to explode in a flash of fire. His consciousness ebbed. As oblivion claimed him, he heard the echoes of a shot and a woman's scream.

Later he heard the voice of Ma Cameron. "Thank the Lord you came when you did, Sheila. The men had gone too crazy to feel shame at handling Brett like that. Dan, you fetch me some water, and be quick about it. Jed, hand me that whis-

key. It's over there in the corner."

"And the rest of you clear out," Sheila's voice snapped. "I'll kill the man who harms my husband further. You cowards! Get out, you hear me? Move!"

"Shameless woman!" Dan Cameron's mutter came bitterly. "Threatening your parents and friends . . . with a gun!"

"You talk of shame," raged Sheila. "Ganging up on your best friend, a man who's gone through hell to save you and who came here unarmed to give you the best news the pool ever had. And you talk of shame!"

Brett opened his eyes. Groggily, he raised to one elbow, staring at Sheila. She stood with her back to the wall, a rifle menacing the pool men, who were backing slowly toward the door. Never had Brett seen such anger as blazed in her eyes—or such tenderness as replaced her rage when she looked at him.

"Are you—all right, Brett?" she quavered.

"I'll do," Brett managed, through split lips. "Put down the gun and call them back."

"They don't deserve to hear what you came here to tell them," she ground out.

BRETT searched the sullen, baffled faces of the pool men. He felt pity for them in their ignorance. Strangely, he blamed only himself in this moment; his leadership must have been at fault.

"We're all victims of a crooked, ruthless man," he rumbled, lifting himself to a sitting position on the edge of the bed. "Our only hope of beating him is to work together. Men, come in and listen to me."

Sheila waved her rifle. "They'll listen, Brett, or I'll run them out of these woods."

Brett shook his head. "Don't talk like that, girl. We've got to quit fighting one another and get together." He leaned back, letting the tension drop away. Then, when they had edged back: "All right, boys, you're going to hear something. . . ."

Patiently, as if none of them were older than scowling Chips Cameron, he told them of his movements since leaving the Bench to raise a loan for the haul road. On and on he talked. The sun was shining straight down into the timber aisles when he was finished.

"... It sounds crazy, boys, but it's gospel. Why does Kershaw want you to sign new quit-claims? The old ones didn't mention price. If Kershaw really wanted to be generous, he'd pay you more money without going to the trouble of drawing new deeds. He wants new quit-claims because I burned all evidence of his title and he's bluffing to get control again."

The pool men stared at him, frozen immobile.

Sandy MacDougal, one of the older men, broke the silence. "Aye, lad," he sighed. "'Tis a braw thing ye did fer us all. And 'tis shamed I am that I have been so thick skulled."

Dan Cameron shuffled forward, his leathery cheeks jerking. He planted himself before Brett, stuck out his chin.

"Come, Brett," he begged, tapping his jaw. "I gave you two good ones here. Pay 'em back with interest. I got 'em coming."

Brett refused. "I'd sooner we both paid this way, Dan," he said, sticking out his hand, trying to smile.

Dan Cameron shook fervently, then looked shamefacedly toward Sheila, standing with her arms about her mother. He moved, and then they were together, laughing and crying all at once. Little Chips stared at Brett for a minute. He tried to say something, but his voice choked and his lips trembled. Ashamed, he whirled, wove through the silent pool men and outside. And then everyone was talking at once.

"What we gonna do now, Brett?"

"We dassent let on to Kershaw. . . ."

"Hell, no! Mustn't give Brett away."

"Nor Link Ludlow, neither. Cripes, there's a man whose hand I want to shake.

Doin' what he done for us, we not even knowin' what he looks like, or him us."

Brett broke a silence. "I think the best thing we can do is to clear out. If Kershaw can't find us, he can't do a thing. In the meantime the railroad will be building and, when it's ready, we'll come down and ship logs. Suppose we make a camp at Medicine Lake. Some of you will have to give me a hand with the stretcher to carry Link. Before we pull out, I'll have a talk with Brodie and learn when he figures to tie up the loose ends and get his cars running."

They hailed his idea, gloating over Kershaw's discomfiture upon finding the once gullible pool men missing. Ma Cameron, with Sheila helping, pitched in and prepared a dinner for them all. The Storm Bench Pool was alive again, and to a man they savored it. They toasted Brett again and again, until Dan Cameron's jug was empty. And then, enjoying life for the first time in weeks, they parted company against their rendezvous at Medicine Lake.

Chapter VIII

TRUMP CARDS

AT NOON the next day, Miles Kershaw fixed his best smile on his death-mask face and rode jauntily into Dan Cameron's clearing. Beside him rode a trusted bodyguard, Gar Veatch. Following them came two armed deputies, sent by Sheriff Haney of Pinedale to guard the small fortune in Kershaw's saddlebags.

Kershaw, with the confidence of one who carves his own destiny, sang out a hearty hail. He was frowning as he drew rein before the cabin, seeing no sign of habitation. *He stepped from the saddle, bleakness touching his cheeks.* The rest remained on their horses.

Gar Veatch said, "Sure you got the time straight, Chief? Looks like nobody's home."

Scowling, Kershaw hammered the door, then jerked the latch and went in. Bewilderment clouded his eyes when he came out. "Looks like they left in a hurry," he grumbled. "Can't understand it. You two deputies, you know this Bench. Light out and herd those pool men here . . . and don't lose any time."

They nodded, loped away. Kershaw loosed his cinch and sought the shade of a tree. For a long time he studied the ground in silence. Then, to Veatch, who had sprawled beside him, he said: "I . . . er . . . I don't like it, Gar. No doubt of it, the Camerons have moved out bag and baggage. But-why?"

"Search me," grunted the gunman. "You never can tell about a hillbilly. Imagine running off and leaving a thousand simoleons."

The banker brooded. "Time has defeated me, Gar. Maybe Madison got to them. I'll lay a thousand dollars we don't find a

pool man on the Bench. Not a one."

"You reckon?"

"And I'll bet another thousand the pool knows I haven't got those quit-claims."

"Cripes, that's bad, chief."

"You're telling me. It means that one of the pool men killed Glendon and stole the papers, which doesn't surprise me much. Or it might be that Ludlow double-crossed me and came up here. If it was that little crook, he likely swapped the quit-claims for the money I paid the pool."

"How about them agents, chief? Mebby they never paid over the money."

"Tommyrot! They had to pay to get the papers signed."

"But what went with them?" demanded Gar. "Gents don't run off with nothing."

"The answer is . . . they're dead! That's my guess. Ludlow said they sent him down with the titles, staying behind to work on Madison. That ain't reasonable, come to think of it."

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"What's it add up to, boss? Does this lick you on the railroad deal?"

KERSHAW'S lips warped in a smile. "You . . . er . . . underestimate me, Veatch. Why did I bring Sheriff Haney here yesterday? To hear my offer to the pool men. He heard them agree to sign new deeds, for a consideration of an extra thousand dollars. That is *prima facie* evidence they signed quit-claims before. They can be held to that, my friend."

Veatch chuckled. "You're a hard man to beat, chief. You think of everything."

"Well . . . er . . . not quite everything, maybe. But I've still got this deal in hand. If the pool men show up before the road's finished, I'll force them to come through. If not, and they buck me, I'll sue them for all they're worth. If they're following that Madison and figuring to ship logs. . . ." He laughed, acridly.

"What about Madison? You've got no hold on him."

"Ah . . . Veatch, there's a hard case. You're right. I have no hold on him. That . . . er . . . that's why I brought you." He stroked his spade chin and a faraway look came to his eyes. "You . . . ahem. . . you follow me, Gar?"

"Sure, chief!" The gunman grinned. "I'll follow you to hell . . . for a thousand dollars a head. When do I begin to commence?"

"When I give the word, not before."

Silence fell between them. After awhile the two deputies roared up to report what Kershaw already surmised. The pool people were gone, as if the earth had swallowed them up.

The banker's orders were sharp and to the point. "You two ride to the Great Western camp on Medicine Peak and round up the idle logging crew. Toll off two men to occupy each of the Bench houses. Tell them to hold the properties up to the point of a dog-eat-dog fight. If the pool men return, I want to know it."

When they had galloped away, Kershaw turned to Veatch. "I'm leaving you at the Madison cabin while I return to White Falls to start a fighting crew up to Medicine Peak. I want an emergency crew there that knows how to fight with something beside their boots and fists. I'm taking no chances. Veatch, another slip-up may be my last. When and if Madison returns, hold him and notify me. I'm depending on you."

Veatch grinned as he watched the banker ride away. Then he, too, mounted and struck through the timber toward the construction camp.

PASSING days became weeks. The rails crawled past Dan Cameron's place, past Bill Southern's and on toward the Great Western timber holdings. Day by day, Pat Brodie grew more worried.

"Not wan stick av timber is Great Western cuttin'," he complained to Veatch one day. "An' divil a wor'rd can I git outta Kershaw. If I don't have sticks to haul when I've laid these rails—"

"Take it easy, Pat," Veatch soothed. "When Miles Kershaw starts cuttin' timber, he'll make you melt these rails keeping up with him."

Similar advice must have come from Kershaw, for Pat Brodie rushed the work. The mystery of the vanished pool people was not explained. Each of the cabins continued to be occupied by men from the Great Western timber camps, on Medicine Peak. And they, in their turn, made these cabins available to Brodie, when he needed them to house his construction offices.

At last the day came. The narrow gauge was complete from Pinedale to Medicine Peak. Only the last spike remained to be driven—a plated spike Pat Brodie insisted be sledged home by Miles Kershaw, the White Falls banker who had made the road possible.

On the Bench, not far from Bill Southern's place, a platform had been built. And

early one morning a shiny, narrow-gauge locomotive puffed out of Pinedale, pulling a string of flatcars equipped with benches to accommodate the crowd. Pinedale businessmen and sawmill owners, looking ahead to prosperous times. Town dads—the mayor, sheriff and councilmen. Visiting dignitaries. And scores of workers and their families happy in the carnival spirit.

The little train snorted up Alder Gulch, puffed laboriously up the loops to the Bench and so to the bunting-draped platform, where the smoke of barbecue fires gave promise of big eating after the speeches and ceremonies.

From atop a timbered ridge, the men of the Storm Bench Pool watched the train arrive and spew out its throng. For six weeks they had sequestered themselves at Medicine Lake, planning for this moment and girding themselves against it. Now they were grim, uneasy, glancing continually at Link Ludlow, whose plan they had agreed to follow. Link stood talking with Brett Madison.

In the interim, with rest and care, Link had mended fast. He had lost his gauntness. Contact with rugged, honest men, who treated him like an equal and respected his judgment, had restored his confidence and erased the bitter lines from his face. But the last twenty-four hours had been hard. Worry had plunged him into despondency.

"I hope to God I've figgered it right, Brett," he murmured now. "Kershaw's playing this like he knows what he's doing. His men are in your homes and his money's finished the railroad. I could be wrong, you know."

"We're taking the chance, Link," Brett said bleakly. "Only trouble with you is you're a kill-joy, if ever I've seen one. Except for you, we'd have been run right off the Bench before now."

Longing touched the little ex-convict's features. "I'm banking on my figgerin', Brett. The only thing that keeps a man

level-headed in stony lonesome is figgerin'. I've done plenty of it. I think I'm right, now. You'd better go down and get it over with."

Brett smiled, held out his hand and they shook. "Luck, Link," said the tall man. "I wish you'd reconsider and stay with us. We'll miss you."

Link gulped. "That goes double, feller. I'll never forget how you've treated me. I feel like I been born all over again. But I'm poison to you folks. If Kershaw spots me, he'll figger out the lay an' put the law onto me. With my record an' these wounds, I'll be put over for killin' Glendon an' spoil any chance you've got. No, it's better that I travel fast and far."

They shook again. The pool men came up to say goodbye, to wish him luck. Sheila brushed his lips with an impulsive kiss. Then they were straggling down toward the celebration, leaving behind the tough man whom life had treated so badly.

With his wife at his side, Brett moved after the others. In his steps was a hesitancy, as if he were unsure of the ground. Sheila was talking, but he scarcely heard her words. His eyes were on that gaily bedecked platform where the crowd milled. Success and triumph seemed only words, far, far away. So many things could happen down there, any one of which could spell doom for the Storm Bench Pool, oblivion for him, and bitter memories for Sheila.

Chapter IX

HIGH-STAKE BLUFF

THE people of the pool joined the crowd, edging close to the platform, where Miles Kershaw, resplendent in beaver hat and tailed coat, was finishing his speech. He caught Brett's eyes, faltered as he picked out the other pool men, each leaning upon his long rifle. Then he stumbled on.

"Ahem-m-m, I . . . er . . . as I was saying, this road is the most important contribution this country has ever known. No longer will these great acres of fine, merchantable timber cry for the saw and the axe. I can assure you that, after a three year period of preparedness, Great Western will start cutting and shooting logs to Pinedale. Men will throng here. Business—"

On the platform, Brodie bounced up from his chair, his face red with sudden passion. "Three years is it?" he bellowed. "Shure, and did Oi hear yez roight, Mister Kershaw. Ye'll not be forgittin' ye told me—"

"Mister . . . er . . . Brodie!" Kershaw halted him, dry and deadly. "I am a banker, holding these timberlands in trust for the many stockholders of Great Western. My judgment as to the time to begin lumbering is probably better than yours. Considering conditions, it will be at least three years before—"

"Hold on!" bawled Brodie, his great fists doubled. "I don't care a hoot about stockholders. My money's in this road, as well as yours. Ye hold a mortgage. If Oi don't haul logs for three years, I lose everything."

Kershaw shrugged. "Sympathy, my good man, must not sway us to a bad business venture. When the mortgage comes due, I'm sure something can be done to extend it. Now if you will allow me to continue, please."

"Ye thievin' divil!" exploded Brodie, moving toward him. "I see through yez now. Ye promised me faithfully, ye'd start cutting when I started the road. Now ye say three years. Ye're stealin' my road legal, robbin' me entirely. I'll lose every cent!"

Rage convulsed his face. A murmur of protest rose from the crowd as Kershaw gave back, his hand near the lapel of his coat. It was then that Brett leaped to the platform.

"Brodie," he barked at the Irishman, halting him, "you're wrong. You won't lose your road because of false promises. The Storm Bench Pool has several million feet waiting to be hauled down now—and money to start cutting on a scale that will keep you humping if Great Western never cuts."

Brodie stood planted, staring at him like a man stunned. Then Kershaw was hurling his queries through a silence electric with tension.

"What logs, Madison? The Storm Bench Pool is defunct, just a name. Where can you cut logs?"

"On the Bench claims, Kershaw."

TRIUMPH lighted the banker's face.

He beckoned to Sheriff Haney. "Sheriff," he said, pompously, "you heard the pool men curse me for buying them out too cheap. Robbing them, as they claimed. You heard me agree to pay them each a thousand dollars extra, as an earnest of my good will. You know they agreed to accept it and sign new papers."

The pool men climbed to the platform to back Brett up.

Sheriff Haney scowled at them. "Sure I did," he conceded. "What's the idea, Madison? Why did you pool men pull out, and not take Kershaw's second offer? That's what I can't see."

Dan Cameron moved out. "Sheriff, we pulled out because Brett Madison convinced us Kershaw's original price was fair enough for our land. Anything wrong about that?"

The lawman looked bewildered. "No, can't say there is. But you admit you sold to Kershaw?"

Brett drew a long breath and spoke the words Link's cunning had placed in his mouth—words intended to split Kershaw's thick wall of treachery wide open.

"Sure we sold," he said. "Except for me, every man in the Storm Bench Pool sold Kershaw his land. They got a fair and de-

cent price for land that will make fine farms, once we log it and the stumps are pulled. It will be worth three times what Kershaw paid for it. You don't think they'd be crazy enough to throw in their rich timber rights, do you?"

A gasp rose from the crowd.

"He's lying!" Kershaw raged. "There was no such reservation. I own every stick of this timber. I hold you accountable for preventing their trespass, Sheriff."

"Hold on, Kershaw," said Brett. "The law can't forbid that without an injunction. And no judge will interfere once he reads the quit-claims."

Sheriff Haney vacillated. "He's right, Kershaw," he murmured. "Trot out the deeds and let's give a look. If they show you own the pool timber rights I'll see they don't haul a log."

"Show you the deeds!" cried Kershaw. "How can I . . . er . . . What I mean to say is . . . I . . . er . . . those papers were

stolen, Sheriff . . . from the bank. And the man who stole them murdered my associate, Thomas Glendon."

The lawman's jaws bulged. "When did all this happen?"

"Three days before you rode up here with me the first time. It happened about four in the morning."

The sheriff snorted. "And you waited till now to mention it? What ails you, Kershaw? Who stole the deeds? Who done said murder?"

Kershaw swept the grinning pool men, as if seeking a victim. His desperate glance came to rest on Brett Madison and his talon finger leveled.

"There's the man, Sheriff. Brett Madison! He murdered Glendon and stole back the deeds I'd already paid for."

THE lawman's voice grew hard. "Hogwash! You amaze me, Kershaw. Madison's claim is a hundred and twenty miles

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from White Falls. Yet, four hours after you say your bank was robbed, Brett Madison tossed Pat Brodie out of his cabin. I've got Brodie's word for that. How'd Madison do it . . . fly? Not likely. No man's flew through the air yet, an' no man ever will. Kershaw, far as I'm concerned, you've just proved yourself a liar and a rascal. You engineered a steal here on the Bench, but it bounced back and slapped you in the face. Another thing, I heard you tell the pool men you knew nothing about the coming of this road, that it was pure luck on your part. Now Brodie says your bank financed construction. Why, for two cents I'd take you down and slap you in jail."

Kershaw was licked and he showed it. He looked wildly about, harkened to the low muttering of the crowd and shrank back. Wordlessly, he turned and left the platform, placing himself within the ranks of Veatch and the Great Western lumberjacks who had been holding down the pool cabins.

The festival was at an end. The sheriff barked orders to all to get back on the cars. Then he turned to Brett, who still was numbed by the suddenness of vindication and victory.

"Nice going, Madison. I always did think there was something fishy the way Kershaw dragged me up here. Well, reckon I'll go back on the train." His eyes flicked nervously to where Kershaw stood in the midst of his scowling henchmen. "You don't think you'll need me here, do you?"

Brett said grimly, "I reckon we'll make out, Sheriff. The shouting's over. Kershaw hasn't a leg to stand on and I doubt he'll call on his lumberjacks. They don't owe him anything. If I know the breed, they won't hitch their wagon to a falling star."

"Faith, the scum'll be down lookin' for jobs in the mornin'," put in Brodie. "Divil a stick av Kershaw's timber will I haul till the Storm Bench claims are logged to bare

stumps." The Harp's face was hard.

Sheriff Haney smiled grimly, walked to the platform edge to scowl down at Kershaw and his Great Western lumberjacks. "Get on the train, Kershaw," he ordered. "We're pullin' out. An' you boys who took over the pool houses, pack your plunder and get out. If you make trouble, I'll dust out cells for you. Get smart. Great Western will be idle for three years, by Kershaw's words. Jobs here will be filled by the Storm Bench Pool. Get what I mean?"

Some just glared sullenly; others nodded. Only Kershaw protested. "You mean . . . er . . . you're asking me to pull out, Sheriff, and leave my men in the hands of this rabble? No thanks, I'll stand with them."

Haney snorted. "If you must stay, Kershaw, that's your business. I refuse to hang around and back up your crooked plays. Take my advice—clear off the Bench for good."

"I . . . er . . . I'm glad you place yourself before witnessess," said the banker, dryly. "This is my land and I'll defend it to the last. More, I promise this will cost you your job. Good day to you, sir."

HE TURNED on his heel, spoke to his men and struck into the timber, northward toward the Great Western Holdings on Medicine Peak.

The lumberjacks shuffled uncertainly. One swore, said, "Me, I don't like it. I'm takin' the train to Pinedale for my time."

"Me too," a second one muttered. "Kershaw lied about a long time job."

Two-thirds of them joined the route, moving in a body to climb the flatcars.

Brett called after them, "Thanks, boys. If you want work, come back. There'll be a job here for you, good pay and good grub."

The rest hurried after Kershaw, and the lawman gripped Brett's hand. "You're on top of the boom now, son. But play it careful. Kershaw's a deep man."

Brett nodded, grinned and watched

Haney board the train with Brodie and the other dignitaries. The whistle woke echoes and the engineer sprang his throttle. The drivers spun and the train throbbed away.

Until the timber swallowed it, Brett, Sheila and the rest stared after the snorting engine. Shining rails, jutting exhaust steam, rolling smoke, these things were symbols of hope and prosperity. Departure of the train brought reaction, left them with a strange loneliness and feeling of unimportance. Suddenly the task ahead seemed unsurmountable.

Sheila pressed close to Brett. "Now it's all up to us," she murmured. "And I'm missing Link."

"Me too," he confessed. "It was his idea and it worked . . . like he planned. I hope wherever he goes luck favors him as it has us."

The beat of the engine exhaust and the clicking of the rails faded out. The spell was broken. Big Bill Southern uttered a warwhoop, grabbed Brett and swung him around. Dan Cameron closed in to pummel him.

"You did 'er, feller. Did 'er in spite of hell."

Everyone was laughing, talking, shouting. Children, caught in the joy of the moment, shrieked and danced about the platform. The women, wan and haggard with the struggle to survive here, wept unashamed. It was a full quarter hour before they quieted, before Brett could speak to them about tomorrow's struggle. They had money, he pointed out, Kershaw money. They'd have to spend it for equipment—tools, donkey engines, cable, food, camp supplies, share and share alike. They were looking at him, silent, waiting for him to finish when something hit Old Angus McDougal with a wet, smacking sound, knocking the Scotchman down like a giant, invisible hand. The vicious snarl of a high-powered rifle echoed through the timber, followed by Kershaw's savage bawl.

"Shoot, you bullies! Let 'em have it! Burn 'em down an' wipe 'em out! Every one! Men, women, kids! Don't leave so much as a nit!"

Chapter X

MAN WHO PLAYED WITH FIRE

STUNNED, those around the platform whirled to face the attack. Leaping forms came crashing from the timber, sunlight glinting off leveled rifles.

Brett took instant command. He yelled, "Dan! Sheila! Jeb! Zeke! Get the women and children into Big Bill's log pile! Put them down . . . face down! Hurry!"

A woman screamed in fright and Sheila whirled her, shouldered her into a run toward the haven of Big Bill Southern's three-year cut, piled at one edge of the clearing. Heavy, twenty-foot sticks scattered pell-mell, waiting for snow that had failed to come.

Brett waited only to see the women and children in full flight, then caught up his rifle, leaning against the platform. He leveled, drew a bead and fired. A lumberjack fell.

"Give 'em hell, boys!" Brett cried. "Feed 'em lead! Give the women and kids a chance."

The pool men needed no urging. They were down, their guns spitting. A Great Western man paused to level at the women. Before he could shoot, a half-score of leaden slugs blasted him off his feet and down. The Storm Bench Pool was taking up the gauge of battle.

So savage was the fight for a few minutes that Kershaw's gun crew paused, then broke for the timber. Brett was up then, leading the charge. A wall of flame faced them and a pool man fell, groaning. It was suicide to advance, and Brett ordered the retreat. Big Bill Southern picked up the fallen man, shouldered him. Then the rest covered him, giving back to the log pile.

They made it without loss, though more than one was burned by lead. Brett among them. Only Angus McDougal lay in the open, and he was done for. His wife and children wept hysterically.

In the timber, Miles Kershaw was gloating. "Trapped them, boys! Circle the clearing and pick 'em off, one by one. And remember, if a single one is spared to carry the tale, you'll swing, every man-jack. Finish 'em!"

Bellied down in the logs, Brett snapped a shot at a figure flitting from bole to bole, beyond the clearing. He missed, cursed, levered in another shell. A hand touched his shoulder and he turned to face Bill Southern.

"How many ca'tridges you got, Brett?" the giant demanded.

"What's in the magazine," Brett grunted. "The rest are in my pack . . . out yonder."

"I've got six," said Bill. "What a fool I was not to have foreseen this."

"Lie low and make each shell count," snapped Brett. "Pass the word. If Kershaw guesses, we won't last five minutes. Don't let the women know."

Big Bill bellied away, leaving a faint trace of blood. And Brett cursed the treachery of one who would murder women and children to line his pockets with gold. Pool firing ceased and the bullets of the lumberjacks kept thudding into their log parapets.

Kershaw's men slowly closed the circle, but it must have been apparent to the banker that the lead was wasted, for the firing soon slackened and died. Silence held for five minutes. Then suddenly, to windward of the-log trap, a wisp of smoke whirled down upon the beleaguered pool force. Then the crackle of flames became clearly audible. A child coughed.

Dan Cameron's hoarse voice rose. "He's torched the brush, by God! Keep your heads down, all of you. Don't get panicky. Breathe easy. And watch for a charge through the smoke!"

BREATHE easy! What a chance! In five minutes the covert was unbearable. Sheila lay beside Brett, her face pressed to the ground, her arm about her brother, Chips. Both were coughing, gasping for air. Children were crying; women whimpering.

Brett kept his head up, peering through the pall, his gun ready for the first sign of attack. But the boiling, acrid smoke baffled him. Tears streamed from his eyes. His lungs burned like fire.

They were suffocating. It couldn't last. But no one broke and, presently, Kershaw's order rang over the crackle of flames. Then they came, leaping, shooting, flogged by Kershaw's snarled hate. . . . Like gray ghosts, the pool men rose to repel the charge that spelled doom.

Close to Brett, a figure materialized. Narrow eyes gleamed malevolently above a bandanna-swathed face. A gun leveled. Brett swerved, felt the breath brush his cheek as gun flame gushed at him. Rifles roared and the man dove head first into Brett, knocking him back and driving the rifle from his hands. Brett rolled the dead man off, regained his weapon. Then Sheila's scream was dinning in his ears.

Whirling, Brett saw the poised, buzzard-like form of Kershaw. Gloating and triumph blazed in his deep-sunk eyes as he swung his pistol barrel. Brett was off balance, unready, an easy target. Even as he drove himself in the turning effort, he saw Kershaw's finger tightening on the trigger. He braced himself.

As the gun roared, Sheila's form came leaping between Brett and the renegade banker. The bullet hit her with an audible impact. She moaned faintly, spun and fell face down. A roar of shots gave answer. Kershaw seemed blown back, but he didn't go down. He whirled and ran, the smoke swallowing him.

Something snapped inside Brett. His stifled breath, the crash of guns and turmoil of conflict, all were forgotten in the rush of

passion to kill. He came up recklessly, hurdled the logs and struck out after Kershaw. Behind him men were roaring for him to come back, but Brett paid no heed. A greater roar was in his ears, and it startled him to realize it came from his lips. He was crazed with grief and terrible rage. Sheila was dead. Kershaw had killed her.

Now he had a glimpse of that gaunt form, bounding through a rift in the smoke pall, heading for the timber. Brett belatedly saw the man's name, had it torn from his lips by an eerie screech that seemed to drive at him from all sides. Behind him he heard the glad yells of the pool men. And then he saw the dim shape of the returning train, brakes screaming. Men came scrambling off her. Gunfire rose to a hellish crescendo as the reinforcements took after the fleeing lumberjacks. And a thrill went through Brett as he recognized the leaders—Pat Brodie, Sheriff Haney . . . and Link Ludlow.

Brett didn't pause, though wonder at Link's presence numbed him. It was all like a bad dream, destructive, kaleidoscopic. The smoke cleared and Brett saw the sombre-garbed banker halt, whirl and level his pistol. It flamed and lead brushed Brett's side.

Brett couldn't have told where he dropped his gun. Weaving, he roared after his man. Again the banker fired. Brett's head jerked as lead furrowed his jaw. But he raced on. Twice more, Kershaw pulled trigger, his aim getting wilder, his eyes dilating as Brett came on like avenging doom, merciless, inexorable.

Then Kershaw cracked. With fear twisting his face, he screamed, whirled and flashed away, Brett gaining at each stride. Then the agency of Kershaw's own making conspired to defeat him. As if the gods of violence mocked this human buzzard, a patch of brush screamed into flame directly before him, barring his way. Trapped, the banker skittered to a stop, spun about and leveled his piece. His teeth bared like a

wolf's as the hammer drew back.

Recklessly, Brett drove at him. The hammer fell soundlessly. The pistol was empty. Brett nearly broke the man's arm with a swipe of his powerful hand. Then he had Kershaw in his grasp. The man squealed like a pig as Brett lifted him.

Laughing terribly, Brett carried him toward the fire, until the glare of it seared his eyeballs. Then, with a heave, he propelled his burden into the greedy flames. Kershaw sailed through the air like a bird, screaming terribly, and the wall of fire swallowed him. Brett saw him rise, execute a grotesque dance of death, stumble and go down. His cries ceased and he failed to rise again. Smoke shrouded the scene.

Brett turned back, his shoulders sagging, tears streaming down his face. "You asked for it, Kershaw," he mumbled. "A man who played with fire is bound to get burned."

A HEAD of him was a murmur of voices. The yammer of guns had ceased.

The fire, reaching the edge of the clearing, was burning out. And in the swirling murk Bill Southern's clearing looked like an approach to hell. Still forms sprawled about the log pile, of them Angus McDougal being the only pool man. The locomotive exhaust had a contented sound. Pool men strove to quiet the women and children while the warriors from the cars straggled out of the timber, grimly exultant.

Sight of Brett roused a general enthusiasm. They came crowding about him, favoring their hurts and giving vent to profane boasts that their troubles were over. But Brett couldn't share their joy. He had one last sorrowful chore, then he would leave Storm Bench forever. He could not endure to remain here with his memories of Sheila. Success, money, leadership, all these things were ashes in his mouth now.

Someone grabbed Brett's arm, tugging at him, saying words. It was Sheriff Haney,

but Brett stared at him vacantly, repeating over and over, "Where's Sheila?"

Haney drew his hand across Brett's cheek, his patience gone. "Shut up! Snap out of it! That's what I'm trying to tell you." He jerked his thumb toward the train. "She's up there."

Brett gaped at him. "What did you say?" he asked, bewildered.

"Wake up! I said she's on a car, working with the wounded. She ain't bad hurt."

Something lifted from Brett's spirit. He opened his mouth, closed it, and was running. He raced to the car where women were applying bandages to bullet cuts. He vaulted up. And then he stood facing her.

"Sheila!" he croaked, and felt her as if doubting her reality. "Sheila! I thought you. . . ."

She was chalky white, but she could laugh at him. "Dead? Not yet, Brett. But I sure thought I was a goner. I had a club when Kershaw loomed up, but I wasn't close enough to use it on him. So I . . . well, Kershaw's bullet hit my club and slammed it against me. Knocked my wind out and maybe broke a rib."

Sheriff Haney was grinning up at him. "Well, Brett," he sighed.

"How'd it happen, Ben?" Brett asked. "Why'd you come back here?"

"Pure luck, fella. Seems Ludlow spotted Kershaw's gunmen marching down here from Medicine Peak. He follered, learned what they aimed to do and made it down here in time to flag the train. We turned back and not a minute too soon. Where's Kershaw?"

"Dead," said Brett. "By fire."

"A fit ending for a snake," muttered the lawman. But Brett didn't hear. His anxious glance picked up Link, herding in a big lumberjack at the point of a gun.

"What does Link Ludlow mean to you, Brett?" Haney asked sternly.

"Mean?" echoed Brett. "He's my pardner, Sheriff, the best a man ever had."

The lawman stroked his heavy jaw. "Humph! Kershaw mentioned a gent named Link Ludlow. But . . . er . . . funny! I can't for the life of me recall what it was about."

"Too bad Kershaw ain't in shape to jog your memory," said Brett.

"Ain't it?" said Haney, thoughtfully. "Oh, well, I won't lose no sleep over it. Likely just another of that crook's lies, anyway." He caught Brett's hand, wrung it fervently and turned away to supervise the loading of prisoners.

THE platform, which had been built for the opening celebration of Pat Brodie's railroad, was not torn down. Instead it was roofed. And once each year the men of the Storm Bench Pool, their workers and many Pinedale people gather there for a dance, feed and celebration. There are races, chopping and sawing contests, feats of lumbering skill, speeches and fun for all. And always it has been Link Ludlow who is marshal of festivities—the quiet-mannered, serious little superintendent of the prosperous pool interests.

Always newcomers and strangers remark upon the strange fact that all but one of the Storm Bench Pool men wears a heavy gold watch chain from which dangles a five dollar gold piece. This, they are told, was the exact surplus in the pool when they had lumped their savings to send Brett Madison to White Falls for a loan to build a haul road. Link Ludlow's charm alone is different, and he grins as he explains.

"This?" he asks, fingering the deformed leaden pendant. "Oh, it's just a flattened .30-30 slug. That's what it cost me to get into this business."

He ruefully rubs his right side, that still aches when the weather changes, smiles knowingly and says no more. But it has been remarked that when he looks at Brett Madison and his beautiful wife, tears come into his eyes.

With a bushwhacker's corpse in their wagon bed, two saddle-warped old-timers rumbled into town for young Frosty White's funeral—armed with double-primed guns to blaze the way for a decent burial!



The Judge said, "Good evening, gentlemen." They whirled to face him.

JUDGE BATES' BOOTHILL RECESS

By LEE FLOREN

FLIES buzzed lazily through the courtroom, and Judge Lemanuel Bates dozed on the bench. The voice of the defense attorney droned in his ears, but the mind of the Judge was back in those hectic days of speedier justice when

men settled differences with smashing knuckles and smoking guns.

He was thinking about those days when he looked across the crowd toward the outer door. A tall man had just entered, his faded blue eyes holding a wildness

strangely out of keeping with his kindly face. He sent a frantic glance toward the Judge and waved an envelope, gesturing that the Judge dismiss the court.

The Judge shook his head, but the man gestured all the more. He opened his mouth to speak but his jaws were too filled with chewing-tobacco. And by that time, the Judge was pounding with his gavel.

"I declare a ten minute recess."

The defense attorney stopped abruptly in the middle of a sentence. "But, Your Honor, I have only a few more words to say in behalf of my client and the case will be in the hands of the jury."

"I declare a recess," the Judge repeated.

The attorney frowned, looked angrily at the Judge, but said nothing more. The audience, consisting mostly of old cowhands pensioned off by neighboring ranches, arose and attempted to stretch the kinks out of their creaking joints.

The man who had hurried wild-eyed into court followed the Judge into his private office. The Judge scowled. "How many times have I told you, Tobacco, that when I'm on the bench I'm not to be disturbed, come hell or high-water?"

Tobacco Jones spat a brown stream into the brass cuspidor. "A telegram, Lem. About Frosty White."

"About Frosty? What's up?"

"Frosty's dead."

"Dead?"

"Yep. Plumb dead."

The Judge digested that, then said, "Let me see that telegram."

Tobacco handed it to him, dug out a plug of Horeshoe, wiped it carefully on his pants-leg, and watched the Judge as he read:

Brockton, Wyoming.
July 12, 1892.

Tobacco Jones, Postmaster.

Judge Lemanuel Bates,
Cowtail, Wyoming.

Frosty White is dead in Weeping Willow.

Will hold funeral arrangements pending your reply.

James Richey,
Attorney at Law.

"When did you get this?" the Judge asked.

"It just come off the wire. I was sortin' out the 2:15 mail when the depot agent stuck it through my window. He knew we'd be anxious to see it pronto, seein' how me an' you raised Frosty."

"Ever hear of Frosty being sick?"

"Nary a word." Tobacco squinted at the fatter man. "How long they usually hold a man before they plant him, Judge?"

"Three days by law. But they may have to bury him sooner because of this heat."

"How about embalmin'? That keep him any longer?"

"Should. Wire back to embalm and hold the body till we arrive." Judge Lemanuel Bates turned his ponderous bulk and went to the wall where a gunbelt and two .45 Colts hung. He strapped the belt around his huge belly, tied down the holsters, took a 10-gauge shotgun from the rack and broke it to verify its loads. "Get a rig, Tobacco. I'll meet you in front of the hardware store."

THE Judge stood by the window and watched his old friend cross the street. Tobacco entered the post office. Soon the depot agent came out and started toward the depot, a paper in his hand. Then Tobacco locked the post office door behind him, and hung a cardboard sign on the doorknob. The lettering on the sign was so big that the Judge easily read it from where he stood:

POST OFFICE CLOSED. POSTMASTER OUT OF TOWN. WILL OPEN NEXT WEEK — MAYBE.

TOBACCO JONES

Tobacco also packed a .45 and carried

a rifle. The Judge turned and trod heavily into the courtroom. The shotgun under one arm, he pounded the desk with the butt of his six-shooter.

"Due to an unavoidable incident," he said, "this court is forced to recess and will resume its official function at a date which will be announced later. Sheriff, take the defendant to his cell."

The defense attorney opened his mouth, but the Judge silenced him before he could speak. "One word of negation from you, Mr. Smith, and I'll have you barred from this court."

The attorney stared, then said meekly, "I have no objections to this procedure, Your Honor."

The crowd stared at his guns as he moved up the aisle. He crossed the street and entered the Latigo Bar. The crowd in the bar stared, too.

"A gallon of Rawhide Star, Whitey," the Judge told the bartender.

"Huntin' trip, Judge?"

"Might turn out to be."

Tobacco waited. He had a team of snappy sorrels hooked to a spring-wagon. "How about a coffin?" he asked.

"Reckon there'd be one in Weeping Willow?"

"That burg's inland. Unless they hauled one in by bull-team, the only box there would be one made by some local sawman outta cottonwood. That lawyer feller who sent that telegram musta rid horseback into Brockton on the railroad an' wired from there."

"We better get a coffin."

"Might be best. We owe him a good funeral, Judge."

They picked out the best box in the hardware store. A wine-red casket, satin-lined. They loaded it on the spring-wagon, covered it with a tarp, climbed on the seat and started off at a fast trot.

Neither man spoke for some time. The Judge took a long pull at his jug. Tobacco chewed methodically.

"You'll swallow one of those big chaws some day," the Judge warned. "An' you'll choke to death."

"I heard that one before. You stick to your lick; I'll hang on to my tobacco. We'll see who'll outlast t'other one."

They drove night and day, changed teams at ranches. And when they got to Weeping Willow, two days later, they had another passenger—a dead man who lay face down beside the coffin.

OF ALL the towns they had ever seen, Weeping Willow was the most misnamed. There was not a willow tree in sight, nor any other kind of tree, for that matter. The town sat on a gumbo mesa in the badlands, sun-baked, desolate, unpainted.

The Judge cast a shrewd glance over the desolation. "Ever been here before, Tobacco? I ain't."

Tobacco spat. "Nope. An' when this is over, I don't reckon I'll ever be back again, neither. Why do you suppose Frosty settled in such a God-forsaken country?"

"Only two things could hold a young man to this country," the Judge said. "Money, or love."

"Must be money, then. Nobody but us two could ever love Frosty. He was too homely an' too o'nery to love."

Tobacco pulled up before the sheriff's office. A group of townsfolk crowded around the spring-wagon, gawking at the dead man.

"Anybody know him?" the Judge asked.

Evidently nobody did. Or, if they did, they would not acknowledge that fact.

"What happened?" the sheriff asked.

The Judge explained. "This gent was waitin' down the road a piece in the brush with a rifle. We come along and he sort of swings his rifle around to get a better bead on us. I saw the sun reflect on it, and I shot. You know him?"

The sheriff shook his head. "Stranger to me."

Two men from the crowd carried the dead man to the morgue.

"You gents aim to stay in town a spell?" the lawman asked.

"Reckon so."

"Might be best," the sheriff said. "There'll have to be an inquest. Put up at the State House. Charge it to the county." He looked under the tarp. "A coffin, huh? You two drummers?"

The Judge nodded.

"Reckon you already filled that one," the sheriff allowed.

Tobacco turned the team in the street and stopped in front of the morgue. "You're an awful liar," he told the Judge.

"I never did cotton to a man that asked a lot of questions." Then he asked one himself. "Why do you figure that gent tried to ambush us?"

"Maybe he thought we was somebody else."

"That fellow was waiting for us—and us only," the Judge said. "Now who, besides this lawyer, Richey, knew we were headed this direction?"

"Nobody that I know of."

"And why would anybody want to kill us off?"

"I sure don't know, Judge."

Frosty White lay on a table. His six-foot frame was covered with a sheet. They looked at the youth for some time, and then Tobacco asked the undertaker, "Was the kid sick long?"

"He was killed."

The Judge and Tobacco exchanged glances. "Horse fall on him?" the Judge asked.

"He tried to rob Jed Oberlee's bank, an' they killed him," was the undisturbed retort.

TOBACCO saw the Judge's face harden and set. He knew a sudden steel had entered the man. Yet, when the Judge spoke, his voice sounded casual, off-hand.

"Where is this bank?"

"Only one in town. Three buildin's down. This side of the street. You men kin to Frosty?"

"Didn't Richey tell you about us?"

"H'ain't seen Mr. Richey for three days. Him an' Frosty was powerful good friends, but he rid off the mornin' Frosty got killed. H'ain't showed up since."

"Frosty embalmed?"

"Yes. I asked Jed Oberlee if he'd foot the bill. He said no, the county'd pay for the funeral. But it takes a long time an' a lot of red tape to get refunds from the county, so I embalmed him, figgerin' somebody'd show up soon to claim the body. You men standin' the expense? One hundred an' fifty bucks."

"We'll pay," Tobacco said. "Where can we get some flowers?"

"Flowers? What fer?"

"We'll tend to that," the Judge said. "You get the parson."

They went outside. There was a bench in the shade of the Mercantile and they sat down. Tobacco bit off a chew.

"Frosty robbin' a bank! That's too raw!"

"Maybe he did."

"Talk sense!" Tobacco said angrily. "We raised Frosty on the straight an' narrow. He ain't forgettin' our teachin's."

A barefooted boy came along and the Judge asked him where they could get some flowers.

"Flowers?" The boy looked at him strangely. The Judge nodded, though, and the boy said, "You mean cactus flowers, yucca lilies, an' them things?"

"That's it." The Judge gave him a five-dollar gold piece, and the boy's eyes widened. "Get your gang. Rustle every flower in the country. Have them right here by tonight."

"Yes, sir," the kid said. He ran down the street calling, "Pablo! Gonzales! Mickey!"

The Judge rose. "Let's get the team into a barn. Get a room an' something

to eat. I'm tired. I'm damned tired."

"You're gettin' older," Tobacco said.

"You get older each day you live," the Judge reminded him.

"All right," Tobacco said disgustedly. "I should have said *old* 'stead of *older*. I never went to college like you did."

They took the team to the livery barn, then got a room at the State House. After a meal, they returned to the sidewalk, picking their teeth.

"Let's visit the bank," Tobacco suggested.

The bank was made of brick that had been hauled in by oxen teams. It was cooler inside. The Judge mopped his brow. Tobacco chewed methodically.

Two men were in the bank. One was rawboned, hard-faced. He looked decidedly out of place in a suit. The other was a short, pot-bellied man.

"Something I can do for you, gentlemen?" the pot-bellied man asked.

THE Judge did the introducing. The pot-bellied man, it turned out, was Jed Oberlee, the banker; the other was Mike Painter, the bank teller.

"We saw you gentlemen drive into town," Oberlee said. "You acquired a passenger enroute, too. Ambush, huh? He live to talk?"

"Not a word," the Judge said.

Oberlee shrugged. "That was too bad."

"A regrettable incident," the Judge said. "But not so tragic, of course, as the death of Frosty White."

Oberlee's brows rose. "Are you any relation to Frosty?"

"Yes," the Judge said "and no." He told him how things stood. "How was he killed?"

The banker sighed. "Frosty had been drinking. He came in with a gun, ordered the two of us to put up our hands. He made me open the safe. I put the money in a sack and he started backing out. My man took a chance and pulled a sawed-

off shotgun from under the counter. We had no other choice, gentlemen. We have to protect the investments of our stockholders."

"Frosty do any shootin'?" Tobacco asked.

"No. Painter shot too fast. But what else could he do?"

The Judge nodded. "Frosty had a ranch around here, didn't he?"

Oberlee seemed to hesitate momentarily. "Yes. On Upper Porcupine Creek, about twenty-five miles from Weeping Willow."

"How much money did he have in the sack?" Tobacco asked.

Painter replied, "About a thousan' dollars, I'd say."

"We were short on cash at that time," Oberlee hastened to explain.

They went outside, found the bench and sat down. "They talked plenty smooth," Tobacco said.

The Judge took a drink. "Too smooth," he said.

"Frosty wasn't that big a fool, Judge. He'd never try a thing like that."

The Judge nodded. "If Frosty was goin' to rob a bank, he'd sure find out how much money there was in it. We sure taught him that well. Now that bank looks nice, but I got a hunch it's shy on cash. This is a tough country around here, Tobacco."

"That's what I figure, too."

The Judge lowered his jug. "Hell, Frosty drunk! You don't believe that, do you?"

Tobacco whiffed the Judge's breath. He moved down the bench. "No," he said emphatically. "Frosty got drunk once, an' it almost killed him. They lied, there; I know they did."

"Another thing," the Judge said. "They claimed Painter shot him when he had his gun out. Frosty could handle a six-shooter—yet, he never got in a shot. That ain't logical."

"That teller's a watchdog," Tobacco

said. "Notice all the artillery he packed? Notice that rifle in the corner? They killed him in cold blood, I say!"

"But why?"

Tobacco frowned. "You're a judge. You met more of this than I have. What causes most killin's?"

"Love."

Tobacco mulled that. "No dice," he said. "This Oberlee is past middle-aged. He's worked the woman angle plumb outta his system. What's another?"

"Wealth."

"Now that's better. Frosty had some property. Maybe Oberlee wanted it. Let's ride out there an' look it over."

"Not me," the Judge said. "I ain't movin' another foot in this weather. Use your brains, not the seat of your britches."

"What'd you mean?"

"I'll show you."

THE courthouse was a squat, frame building. It was hot as hell inside. The Judge mopped his brow again. Tobacco spat on a crack.

A long counter fronted the single room. A heavy-set man, wet with perspiration, heaved his sticky bulk from his swivel-chair, and lumbered forward.

"Want something?"

The Judge said, "We're thinking about settling hereabouts. We want to look up some valuations on various pieces of property we're interested in. I take it you're County Assessor?"

"I'm the whole courthouse 'cept for the sheriff. Whereabouts this land located, mister?"

"Upper Porcupine Creek."

"Somewhere close to Frosty White's property?"

"Around that section."

The man laid a map-book on the counter. He had marked each parcel of land with the name of its owner. A cursory glance showed that Frosty owned the entire length of Upper Porcupine. Jed Oberlee,

the banker, owned all the surrounding land.

"Any water in Upper Porcupine?" Tobacco asked.

"Only crick in the county that has water all the year around. T'others have water only when it rains or the snow runs off in the spring." A fat finger descended on the map. "Here the water runs into a sand-bed an' disappears."

"Let me get this straight," the Judge said. "Upper Porcupine starts on White's property and ends there, too? In other words, the water never runs off his land?"

"That's it," the assessor said.

"What do the other cowmen do for water?"

"Drill wells. But it's a long way to water an' the water isn't much good. Too much gypsum an' alkali."

"White's land clear of mor'gages?" Tobacco asked.

"I reckon so."

"I take it you're County Recorder, too," the Judge said. "Let me see your Book of Mortgages."

The man spoke slowly. "I usually don't let the public see my records. I always figure—"

"They're a public record," the Judge interrupted.

"Yes. But still—"

"Those records are open to public inspection. As a citizen, I have the right to see them. That's the law."

The man studied the Judge. "What'd you know about the law?" he asked.

"I know you can be incarcerated if you refuse to leave your recordings open to public perusal. State Statute of 1890, Volume 1, Section 3, Page 132."

The man stared. "You a lawyer?" he asked.

"Part of one," the Judge said.

THE man produced the book, and they read it carefully, then went outside. It had been a long shot—but they had hit

their target right square on the head.

"So that's it," Tobacco said. "Oberlee holds a ten thousan' dollar mor'gage on Frosty's property, an' it falls due next week. Oberlee needs Frosty's water. Now we'll say Frosty couldn't pay. Oberlee would get the land. So why'd they have to kill him?"

"What if Frosty *could* pay?"

"Oh-oh! Frosty did raise the money. He walked into the bank. They knew he had it. They holler 'stickup', cut him down, plant a sack of money in his han', make it look like the real McCoy. Oberlee gets Frosty's property and ten thousan' bucks. Frosty gets a wormy grave!"

The Judge grew thoughtful. "Where could Frosty get ten thousand?"

"Borrow it."

"From who? That's a lot of money. This town don't look very prosperous. There ain't ten thousand here."

"He could have sold somethin'. Cattle, maybe."

The Judge drank heavily. "He'd have to drive his cattle to the railroad. Ship from Gray Bull, probably. That's a hundred miles away. Wonder how we could find out?"

"Maybe somebody here'd know."

The Judge shook his head. "He'd drive across the north end of the valley. That'd be closest for him; but a long ways from here. Nobody in Weeping Willow'd know about that. Or would they? Is there a stage run between here and Gray Bull?"

"Oughta be one."

"Stay here and watch my jug."

The Judge went down the street, saw that the boys had piled cactus flowers and yucca lilies in front of the undertaking-parlor. The undertaker was standing out in front, frowning at the collection.

The Judge entered the hotel, nodded at the motherly-looking woman who managed the place. "Who drives the Gray Bull stage?" he asked.

"Mark Watton. He's upstairs, asleep.

He drives nights because of the heat."

"Could I disturb him?"

"He won't be asleep," she told him. "Not in this heat."

The Judge introduced himself as a cowman from the upper valley, asked if Watton thought it advisable to drive a herd through to Gray Bull in this heat.

"Saw a CY herd go through about a month ago," was the laconic answer.

The Judge thanked him, went downstairs. "Who owns the CY iron?" he asked the woman.

"Frosty White."

He found Tobacco, informed him of his findings. Tobacco spat. "We can't arrest 'em on that evidence," he said. "Too flimsy."

"No," the Judge admitted. He took another pull at his jug. "But I got a plan."

They went to the undertaking parlor, found Oberlee there, talking with the undertaker.

"I've got a problem," the Judge said.

Oberlee smiled. "Can I help you?"

"**M**AYBE you can. A month ago, this lawyer fellow, Richey, wrote me. He said Frosty was hard up and needed cash to meet a loan. He said Frosty stood to lose his outfit if he couldn't meet this payment. Now I knew Frosty was too proud to ask me for money. He was always a proud kid—independent as hell. So I figured that Richey, being Frosty's best friend, had taken it upon himself to write me. I sent Richey ten thousand dollars. Now, where is Richey?"

"You get his note?"

"Yes. But what good is a note when the man who backed it is missing?"

"Not much good," the banker said.

The Judge looked at the undertaker. "You find any money on Frosty?"

The undertaker smiled. "Frosty packed a jackknife, a pocket watch an' four-bits."

The Judge cursed. "That damn lawyer

skipped out with all that money!"

The banker looked serious. The undertaker said, "Too bad, mister."

"Guess I lost it," the Judge murmured bitterly. "We'll bury Frosty at daybreak. We want to get an early start. It's a long drive back."

When they were outside, Tobacco studied the Judge curiously. "You never sent that lawyer any money?" he accused.

"I know that," the Judge said. "But Oberlee don't."

They went to the hotel and the Judge told the woman, "We're tired—dog-tired. We're hitting the hay. Nobody is to disturb us under any circumstances. Understand?"

Upstairs, in their room, Tobacco said, "I'm not goin' to bed." He sat and chewed. The Judge lay down, fully dressed. Finally, Tobacco's face lighted.

"I reckon I savvy now," he said. "Oberlee figgers you really sent Richey that money. An' he'll know Frosty never had it when they killed him. Now he'll guess Richey's got it. But where is Richey?"

"Unless I'm badly mistaken," the Judge said, "our friend Richey is dead."

"Dead? Who killed him?"

"Here's what I figure. Oberlee hired a gunman to kill Richey so he couldn't get word to us about Frosty. Oberlee probably didn't want us to know about Frosty. Then he could plant him and we'd never be the wiser. But Richey got to the railroad. He got our return wire. Then the gunman killed him. This gunman found our telegram on Richey. So he waited to ambush us. How else could he have known we were coming?"

"By hell," Tobacco said, "that may be right. Then Oberlee'll know Richey didn't have this imaginary money on him. He'll figure Richey gave it to Frosty—that Frosty hid it someplace."

"Where would Frosty hide it?"

"Aroun' his house, I'd say."

"That's what I think, too."

They waited until night and then, unnoticed, went down the outside stairway to the alley. The hostler had already turned in, so they harnessed their team and drove into the night. No one saw them leave Weeping Willow.

THEY knew the general direction to Frosty's spread—the assessor's map had told them that. When the terrain grew too rough for the spring-wagon they unhooked and rode bareback. The Judge bounced awkwardly, but Tobacco rode like part of his horse. They got there shortly before midnight.

"I hope this works," Tobacco said.

"It has to work," the Judge told him.

A full moon was rising. Frosty's spread lay below them in a small valley: a corral, a barn, a two-room frame house.

They tied their horses deep in the brush, then descended on foot. Tobacco, rifle in hand, hid in the buckbrush about fifty feet from the cabin door. The Judge entered and took a chair in the corner, his scattergun pointed toward the open door.

They waited two hours, but it seemed much longer. Finally two horsemen rode into the barn, left their horses there and walked toward the house. The Judge recognized them the minute they stepped into the room. Jed Oberlee and Painter, the bank teller.

"Where's a lamp?" Oberlee asked.

"Here's one," Painter grunted.

Painter lighted the kerosene lamp.

The Judge said, "Good evening, gentlemen."

They whirled to face him, their hands over their guns. Painter was the first to recover his composure.

"What're you doin' here?" he demanded.

The Judge never got to his feet. He just sat there, big and fat, his shotgun up. And then Tobacco, his rifle pointed toward the two, stepped into the room.

"Nice work, Judge."

"We got them," the Judge agreed.

"What d'you mean?" Oberlee demanded.

"I never sent Richey that money," the Judge explained. "I made up that story. We know what happened. Frosty shipped some cattle to Gray Bull. He came to pay you. You killed him. Killed him to get his money and his water."

"Can you prove that in court?" Oberlee asked.

"No," the Judge admitted. "But we can jail you for burglary. Illegal entry upon private property after dark. And while you're in jail we'll work on Frosty's case."

Painter looked at Oberlee. "I can't afford to go to jail."

"Past criminal record, huh?" the Judge said.

Painter studied him. "You know too much," he snarled.

"Maybe so," the Judge admitted.

TOBACCO saw that Painter had his thumbs hooked in his gunbelt, scant inches from his revolvers. Oberlee, too, had his hand close to his weapon.

During the tense silence, Tobacco saw something strange. The Judge had lowered his shotgun slightly, as though the weight of it had tired his arms. Accordingly, Tobacco lowered his rifle. Painter took quick cognizance of the lowered weapons. He cursed, and drew his guns. Oberlee had no other choice—he had to follow suit.

Sixguns barked. The rifle spat; the shotgun coughed. Then it was over, with Ober-

lee and Painter dead. The Judge got up.

"Well," he said, "we gave them a chance. Hurt, Tobacco?"

Tobacco spat. "Bum shots," he said. "What about you?"

"Nary a scratch. We better skeedaddle; somebody'll find them later. Nobody'll know we did it."

The hostler was still asleep when they drove in. They rubbed their horses dry and curried them. They went up the rear stairway to their room, dozed until dawn.

At breakfast, the Judge asked the woman, "Anybody come lookin' for us?"

"Judge Oberlee was here. But I told him you were sleeping, so he left."

They buried Frosty White under the rimrock. Then the coroner's jury exonerated the Judge in the killing of the gunman who had tried to keep them out of Weeping Willow. Two hours later they drove out of town.

"What about Frosty's property?" Tobacco asked.

"Legally, Oberlee's heirs will inherit the mortgage," the Judge said. "We can redeem it, seeing we're Frosty's heirs. You want it?"

"Hell, no," Tobacco snorted.

They drove in silence for five miles. "Well, we gave him a good funeral," Tobacco said slowly. "Nothin' more we could do, was there?"

The Judge blew his nose. "Nary a thing more," he said.



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**10 STORY
WESTERN
MAGAZINE**

GEORGE PARROTT'S POUND OF FLESH

By WILLIAM F. KAY

Big Nose George Parrott knew Wyoming justice would square things for the bushwhacking of its two deputies. But George would have dug his own grave had he realized that Wyoming, in this case, wouldn't let a murderer rest—even after he was hanged!

IN a rosewood showcase, prominently displayed in the lobby of a bank in Rawlins, Wyoming, repose many mementoes of the Old West, and the colorful days of the late 1860's and '70's, when the Union Pacific Railroad was placing its ribbons of steel across the wild lands that had been the stamping ground of Sioux and Blackfoot.

A single shoe, fashionable in the cut of the early '80's, seems strangely out of place, until one examines the exhibits near-



Another and stouter rope was noosed around George's windpipe.

est to it in the locked cabinet. A fading photograph of two graves; yellowing letters and, most bizarre of all, an aluminum-painted plaster cast of a human head, life size and grisly. All these articles are part of the history of crude Western justice. The shoe—its mate responds in a nearby desk drawer—was fabricated from the skin of a human being: the same being Big Nose George Parrott, train-robber and murderer.

Still alive today, in southwestern Wyoming, are many hale and hearty old pioneers to whom Big Nose George, his misdeeds and violent end, no less than his subsequent preservation at a cobbler's hands, are subjects of many a salty story. Duly documented, legally authenticated, the saga of Big Nose bears telling. It runs like this:

In late 1880, a train-robbing band made life interesting for peace officers, railroad detectives and other man-catchers in Carbon County, of which Rawlins is the seat. The gang was headed by one George Parrott, concerning whose early life little is known. Due to his oversize nose, Parrott had acquired the locally-conferred nickname of Big Nose George.

Associated with him were several fellow practitioners of the hold-up art. These included Dutch Charley, whose name has been lost to archives, but whose origin was undoubtedly German. Two others were known as Tom Reed and Slim Wan. However, tradition has it that Reed was simply an alias for one of the notorious Younger Brothers; while Wan, 'tis gravely related by oldsters who dislike being doubted, was none other than the redoubtable Frank James, Jesse's brother.

IT CAME to pass that Big Nose George planned what was intended to be a most profitable coup for his gang; no less an exploit than holding up a Union Pacific pay train on its monthly visit along the U.P. main line. In those days, the pay

car's advent, with cash for numerous railroad workers, was a notable event. And so the gang went to work.

At a point just outside the town of Carbon, now merely a memory, Big Nose and his satellites pulled out the spikes holding a length of rail to its ties. Leaving the rail in place, the bandits attached wires to it, intending to pull the section of rail out of place just as the special train bearing the pay car passed by. This, they reasoned, would derail the treasure car, facilitating the contemplated robbery.

Unfortunately, a vigilant section foreman, whose name comes down to us as Erick Brown, happened along in his hand-car, on a routine tour of inspection. With his crew of section hands, he observed the dangerous condition, rectified it, and hastened away to Carbon, where he reported the attempt at wrecking. Not until many months later did Foreman Brown learn how close he and his crew had been to annihilation at the hands of the Big Nose gang, who had been in ambush nearby. Only the orders of Big Nose himself restrained the itching trigger fingers of his associates, who wanted to "wipe out the whole bunch." Or so said Big Nose, before he parted with his hide, later on.

However, sensing that the time was inopportune for a holdup, the gang abandoned the project. Deciding upon a change of scenery, they rode away to Rattlesnake Creek, in the Elk Mountain country, some sixty miles southeast of Rawlins. There they rested, while their jaded horses recuperated. Meanwhile, Nemesis was getting organized.

Back in Rawlins, Union Pacific officials held counsel with sheriffs and deputies. Two picked men, familiar with all the trails, were assigned to the case, which had already been classed as a "typical Big Nose job." Deputy sheriffs Widdowfield and Vincent took up the job of trailing down the gang. To allay suspicion, they equipped themselves as prospectors, with

full outfit of pack-horses laden with tools, supplies and other impedimenta of gold-seekers, many of whom were abroad in the country at the time.

Vincent and Widdowfield had known that their lives were hanging upon very slim threads, but, intrepid as became their job, they took up the cold trail of Big Nose and his band. In due course, they found themselves gaining upon their quarry.

About a week out from Rawlins, they came upon an extinguished camp fire with no signs of life nearby. Dismounting, Widdowfield and Vincent investigated the fire. Feeling in the ashes, they found signs of warmth. Widdowfield then said, incautiously, "We're close on Big Nose's trail; they can't be far ahead!"

These were the last words ever spoken by Widdowfield, or heard by his fellow officer. Concealed in the brush nearby, was the Big Nose gang! This time there was no hesitation. A volley of shots rang out from ambush; and, with no opportunity to defend themselves, the lives of Widdowfield and Vincent were callously blasted out by bandit bullets. And, hell-for-leather, the band rode away, with murder added to their other misdeeds.

THREE weeks later, posses found what was left of the bodies of the two deputies, in Rattlesnake Canyon. And back in Rawlins, a grim, quiet, merciless quest was organized for Big Nose and his outfit, who seemed to have vanished from the earth's face.

In Montana, Big Nose and his pals, incognito, took up life afresh. What further depredations they may have planned, we do not know. Big Nose George was, apparently, also equipped with a big mouth; for, months after the murder, he became boastful while drunk. With his cronies, he bragged about his banditries "back in Wyoming." But keen ears and watchful eyes were about them. Word was rushed

back to Rawlins. Some level-eyed, silent deputies succeeded in "conveying" Big Nose and Dutch Charley back to Carbon County in Wyoming. No mention is made of extradition, legal technicalities or other trimmings; the wanted men were simply "brought back."

By a margin of minutes, Tom Reed and Slim Wan eluded the deputies, and pass out of this story. En route to Rawlins, a group of determined men, economical of speech but eloquent in action, took Dutch Charley from the train at Old Carbon station—and hanged him to the nearest tree. Exit Charley.

Big Nose, who by this time had made a "partial confession"—under what inducements we are not told—was conveyed in safety to Rawlins. Tried for first degree murder, and on the strength of his own confession, Big Nose George was sentenced to be hanged, "some time during the month of April, 1881."

But Big Nose was non-cooperative, not to say resourceful. He didn't want to be hanged, it seems. Late in March, with an old case-knife he had somehow managed to conceal, he patiently sawed away the bolts from the substantial, hand-forged leg irons with which he had been decorated. Armed with the shackles—no mean weapon, he it said—Big Nose awaited the nightly visit of his jailor. When the turnkey showed up, George promptly slugged him over the head and started for the doorway.

However, the jailor's wife, who had heard the tumult, rushed to the main cell-house door, slammed it shut from the outside and frustrated George's break for liberty.

When news spread through Rawlins' small confines of Big Nose's latest escapade, it was felt that George was, to say the least, anti-social to a marked degree. Accordingly, and with Dutch Charley's end in mind, it was decided that Rawlins, not to be outdone by Old Carbon City, would

stage a necktie party, with Big Nose as the honoree.

A young doctor, then a newcomer to Rawlins, was called to dress the wounds of the jailor, who had suffered only contusions of the scalp. Blacksmith Jim Candlish, fabricator of the shackles, was called in to replace the rivets that George had sawed; and the shackles themselves were replaced on George's ankles.

Meanwhile, a mob was forming. With quaint solicitude for legal formality, even at a lynching, the leaders of the group bespoke the presence of Doctor Osborne, the young medico, at the execution. Dr. Osborne was to say when "Big Nose George was legally dead," despite the illegality of his despatching. And so the group proceeded to the jail.

GATHERING in Big Nose George, who this time showed a decided objection to leaving the jail confines, the orderly mob traversed a short distance, a convenient telegraph pole being the objective. George shuffled along, his gait hampered by the shackles. At the base of operations, the culprit's hands were tied behind his back, and he was lifted atop an empty kerosene barrel, conveniently nearby.

A noose was fitted; the free end of the rope made fast to the cross-arm of the pole. Next, the kerosene barrel was kicked from under George's shackled feet. And then—the rope broke! On the ground, George succeeded in wriggling loose from the cords around his wrists. Talking fast, he suggested to the mob that they shoot him, instead of hanging him. No soap; they'd come for a hanging, and a hanging they'd have.

Another and stouter rope was noosed around George's windpipe; a ladder was set in place, and, to quote an eyewitness statement: "he was compelled to climb up the ladder about twelve feet." What compulsion was exercised, is not set forth.

His hands untied, Big Nose shinnied up the ladder, which then was pulled from under him. Clutching the pole, George continued to climb; but, handicapped by the shackles, his hold gave way, and he slowly strangled. After four hours hanging, Big Nose was pronounced dead—a fairly safe guess—and was cut down. The leg-irons were removed, donated to the young doctor; and, to quote the latter's statement:

"I was permitted to make a plaster-paris death mask of Big Nose George, and also to remove the skin from the breast of his body, which (skin) was later tanned, and from it a pair of shoes were made."

The young physician, now in his eighty-third year, later became divisional surgeon and doctor for the Union Pacific; from then on, he was, and still is, prominent in Wyoming politics and civic affairs.

Doctor J. E. Osborne continues as chairman of the Rawlins National Bank, which houses the rosewood cabinet containing all the mementoes of swift, certain Western justice, as administered to Big Nose George. The fading photograph depicts the graves of the two brave deputies, Widowfield and Vincent, so callously murdered from ambush. The painted plaster head, most prominent feature of which is the enormous nose that earned for Parrott the sobriquet of Big Nose George, was made from the original cast that Dr. Osborne took, after the malefactor had been hanged.

And, to complete the inventory, are the shackles that figured so prominently in the story just related. During the course of the years that have elapsed, hundreds of visitors have viewed the little exhibit, especially the shoes, one of which is kept in the desk used by Dr. Osborne, for easier inspection by those interested in the somewhat macabre history of the fancy-looking footgear.

A BUTTON LEADS

Chapter I

TRouble COMES TO COYOTE RANGE

VIC LACEY pulled his bronc down to a walk as they hit Gunnison's dusty street. He turned to glance at the lean, hard-faced youngster riding by his side, and something in Brent Taylor's eyes dampened the good humor in him.

He felt the pull of the youngster's mood, the wildness in him, and the hot, angry temper that always simmered in this slim, handsome kid who had lived a hard give-and-take life since childhood.

And, knowing the kid, an ominous premonition came to Lacey as they pulled up by the Forty-Five Bar rack. He was starting up The Trail in the morning. Eight hundred miles to Abilene—with a thou-

He started to back away from the fire. "I'm pullin' out of this the way I came in—of my own free will."



Vic Lacey's vow to clear the murder-branded, fugitive kid he'd reared demanded one-man war against an owlhoot legion—and his so-called side-winder allies, who fought with ambush lead and a crooked sheriff's badge to beat the man whose cause they backed!

A BUTTON LEADS

Chapter I

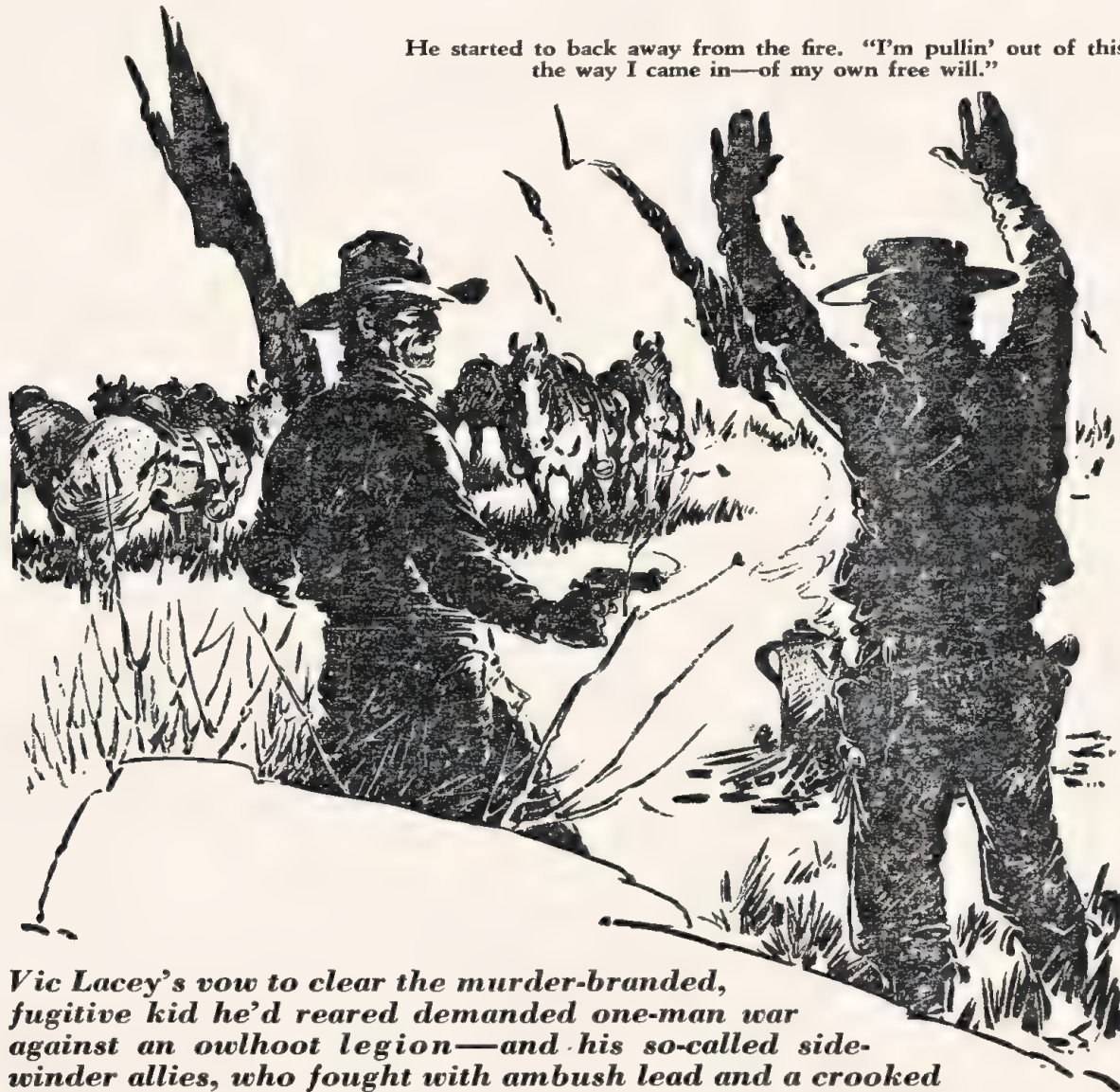
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SATAN'S GUN CLAN

sand head of Lazy X beef in his care, and a kindly old cowman depending on him.

He had asked Sandy for the afternoon off, and had come to town with Brent to celebrate. Brent was staying on the Lazy X. During the five years since the day he had met the kid, a ragged, cold-eyed

youngster of seventeen, on the old Emigrant Trail, and together sought shelter from a lashing thunderstorm in an old shack, they had never been separated. They had ridden over a lot of the country together, since then, and a bond had grown between them.



A short, swift novel of Western courage

By BARRY CORD

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And because of this, a strange foreboding clung to Lacey as he eased out of saddle. Young Brent was as volatile as nitroglycerin, and as dangerous. If something rubbed the kid wrong, while he was away. . . .

He shrugged the thought out of his mind, and looking up at Brent, he grinned. "You look 'bout as happy as a coyote with a bellyful of strychnine, kid," he said easily. "What's eatin' yuh? Thinkin' of the fun yo're gonna miss by stayin' behind?"

Brent moved a well-constructed pair of shoulders in a shrug. He was moody today, and when he was like this he talked little. He came out of the saddle with lithe, pantherish grace. This it was that hinted at dangerousness in young Taylor; a fluidity of movement that seemed effortless. The gun set at his hip was low and thonged down, and Vic Lacey knew from experience there were few men in the Southwest who could match the kid if it came to gun trouble; himself not excepted.

HE FELL in beside Brent, and had to step aside as Taylor halted abruptly. Some of the dark wildness eased out of the youngster's face. He said, "Wait a minute, Vic," and moved away across the dusty, sun-splashed street.

Lacey turned, frowning. Across the road a buckboard was pulled up before the Gunnison National Bank. A girl sat in the seat—a slim, erect girl in a ruffled black dress. Suddenly Lacey grinned with understanding.

This, evidently, was what was troubling the kid. He shrugged, reached into his shirt pocket for the makings. He didn't blame Brent. Helen Hunter was enough to unsettle any man. Trim, laughing-eyed, auburn-haired, she had half the men on her father's Circle H spread fighting for the mere chance to saddle her horse, or drive her to town when she elected to use the buckboard for shopping purposes.

Lacey had felt the pull of her attraction

himself, and didn't deny it. Until he had come to sense the way Brent felt about her, and consciously eased himself into the background.

He stood there now, watching the youngster pause by the buckboard—sensing, even, at this distance, the feeling in young Taylor as he greeted her. Lacey lighted his cigarette as he waited, and for a moment his mind backtracked two years, and he saw himself and Brent pause horses up on the rimrock and look down on the rolling sweep of Coyote range with hard, drifter eyes.

They hadn't intended to stay. Just long enough to feel gold eagles jingle in their jeans again. They weren't the settling-down kind.

But they had stayed. Had stayed as riders for Sandy Barnes' Lazy X outfit. And it hadn't been the pay, nor the country that had held them.

Lacey remembered again the night he and Brent had come to town—to Martin Osler's christening of his first son. They had met Helen there, under the wide arch in Osler's big house. . . .

The memories in Lacey's mind faded abruptly and he was stiff and cold, watching the scene across the street. A wiry, big-hatted figure had come out of the bank. And all at once the atmosphere about the buckboard had grown tense. . . .

Lacey crossed the street with long, quick strides. The wiry man's voice crackled loudly in the heat-beaten stillness, drawing the attention of idlers along the walk.

"I told you once before, Taylor—*keep away from my daughter!* I don't want yore kind hangin' around! An' I ain't gonna repeat it!"

Lacey reached the kid as he was stepping forward, his lips pulled thin and hard against his teeth. He caught Brent, spun him around and away from the hard-eyed cowman on the walk.

Brent whirled, his voice thin with cold, deadly fury. "Let me alone, Vic! Damn

you, *let me alone!* No man kin talk to me like thet an'—"

Lacey held him, his muscles bulging against his sweaty blue shirt. He was a big man, almost a head taller than Brent, and solid with the rangy, whipcord hardness twenty-seven years had built into him. But for a moment he had his hands full with the wild, slim youngster who fought to break loose.

He said, "Easy, kid! *Easy!*" And then, when he felt the wild, trembling fury in the youngster ebb, when the flare in his dark, stormy eyes faded, he let Brent go. He turned to face Frank Hunter, who hadn't moved—whose wiry figure had merely slouched in readiness.

HE WAS fifty-four years old, this stubborn, leathery-faced cowman who had been fighting ill-luck for nearly twenty years. He owned the Circle H, the second biggest outfit in the Coyote section, and he and Sandy Barnes had once been close friends. Turn of fortune, and a minor incident over water, had broken that friendship, till now Hunter passed Barnes by without nodding, his leathery face hard and set.

That hostility he extended to all who rode for Sandy. This, Lacey knew, and because of it he held back the angry stir of his own mood.

He said, "Yo're actin' like a stubborn old fool, Hunter—proddin' the kid this way! Just 'cause of some trouble between you an' Sandy. Hell, if you wasn't so blind an' set in yore ways you'd mebbe see thet most of this bad feelin' is yore own fault. Takin' it out on—"

"That's enough of that!" the old cowman snapped harshly. "I said what I meant. An' it goes for you too, Lacey. It ain't only 'cause you ride for Sandy!" His gaze dropped in meaning glance to Lacey's two-tied guns. "I know yore kind," he went on. "Gunmen! An' I don't like that breed around my daughter. I'm sayin' it

plain, so you'll understand—the both of you! Keep away from me an' mine!"

Lacey felt the youngster tighten up beside him. And a grin grew long and cold on his lips. He nodded, looking up at the white-faced girl on the buckboard. He said, slowly, "If that's the way you want it, Hunter."

The old cowman said, "Yeah!" in a harsh, unyielding tone. "That's the way I want it!" He came down off the boardwalk and was climbing into the seat when a heavy voice hailed him.

Sheriff Tim Bailey came down the walk toward them, his beefy face tired and worried. He looked from Hunter's hard features to Lacey, and the lean, stiff Brent, and scowled, sensing trouble here.

But he brushed it aside, his mind occupied with a more immediate problem. He said, "Hunter, I just got word that gunslick border-hopper, Seelong, is headed this way. Better tell yore men to ride well heeled an' in pairs 'till I find out if it's a false alarm. You too, Lacey," he said, turning. "Tell Sandy to double his line-house men, an' to send someone to town at the first sign of trouble. I reckon I don't have to tell you this Seelong is bad news, gents. If he's really headed—"

Hunter nodded. "I'll be on the lookout, Tim. I can't afford to lose any more beef." His gaze swung down to Lacey and Brent, and the hard hostility in his eyes made taut lines around his mouth. But he didn't say anything further. He swung the gelding around, nodded briefly to Bailey and wheeled away.

The sheriff looked after him, and then down to Lacey and Brent. The worried look grew plain in his eyes. "I got a hunch hell's gonna break loose around here, Lacey. If only I had a couple more deppities who could handle a sixgun like the one I got now, I'd rest easier. Block Edman has his faults, mebbe. But not when it comes to usin' a shootin' iron. Now if you an' Brent were to—"

Lacey grinned. "Sorry, Tim. But I'm headin' north in the mornin'. Takin' a bunch of Lazy X steers up The Trail. An' I don't reckon the kid is interested." He turned away, shoving Brent ahead of him. "C'mon, kid. We got some celebratin' to do—remember? Forget what Hunter said. He's got somethin' eatin' under his hide. It'll be different when he gets straightened out!"

They went into the Forty-Five Bar with the shadows just beginning to lengthen in the street. They played stud with Curly and Lanky of the O Bar, and Lacey lost his last month's pay. Later, Smiley, foreman of Hunter's Circle H, and Booger, his bunkmate, came in, and midnight found the six of them singing Rosie Nell in lusty, if somewhat unharmonious voices.

And in the general gaiety of the evening Lacey forgot the incident of the afternoon. It didn't return to him until he and Brent started back for the Lazy X, and he became conscious of Brent's grim, occupied mood. Apprehension stabbed through the liquor glow in Lacey. There was trouble brewing in the kid. He tried to talk Brent out of it the rest of the way to the bunkhouse. And knew, when finally they turned in, that he had failed.

Lacey left at dawn to take charge of the trail herd already moving out of the valley. He said goodbye to Brent rather jokingly, hiding his concern that way, before riding out.

He was never to see the kid again, till four long months later, when a lot of things were to be finally straightened out in a gunfight that was to make grim history in the Coyote range.

Chapter II

SIX-GUN CHALLENGE

EIGHT hundred miles to Abilene . . . eight hundred miles of hell. They hit the Chisholm at Fort Worth, crossed the

Red at flood. They lost a man in the Little Washita at Line Creek, and fought dust and raiding Comanches across the Territory. And, at trail's end, they found Abilene fading. The wild, lawless town Lacey remembered from a previous visit, when he and Brent had come up the Chisholm with another outfit, was like a boiling kettle that had subsided. There was talk of westward pushing rails, and of a town named Dodge City. . . .

Lacey left the trail outfit at Abilene, and rode north to see a cattle buyer on business for Sandy Barnes. And when it was over he turned his blaze-faced black to Gunnison. . . .

He hit Gunnison at the tail end of a late summer day, four months from the morning he had left the Coyote ranges. He was tired, dusty, unshaved, eager to see familiar, friendly faces again. And found instead a strange tension, a sense of trouble that lay cold and warning in the wide, practically deserted street which had bustled with activity.

He came out of saddle in front of the Forty-Five Bar slowly, a hard frown settling over his strong, dust-grimed face. He got his lean hips against the tie rail and paused here a moment, trying to gauge the strange hostility he suddenly felt in the town.

The creaking screen door in Hayes' Mercantile, flanking the Forty-Five Bar, swung him around. His gaze lifted to the trim, gingham clad figure coming out. And something seemed to grip them both, hold them in the rigid spell of surprise.

This change in Gunnison had affected Helen Hunter also. The thought struck Lacey oddly as he loosened long muscles, put a grin on his hard face. The beauty of healthy vitality lay hidden under the shadow that hardened her mouth. Her eyes, which had laughed easily once, were cold and hostile, and something in their blue depths told the big trail-boss they had not laughed for a long time.

The fading sun's rays were red across his bronzed face as he moved to her. He paused in the trampled dust by the store steps. His voice was even, with the touch of surprise in it. "Has it been that long, Helen? So long you've forgotten me?"

Anger suddenly reddened the paleness of her cheeks. Brought something hard into her eyes. "Far too long," she said, and her voice was dull. Her gaze dropped past him, as if half unconsciously looking for someone not there. "You must feel very sure of yourself, Vic—riding into town so. Far more sure than Brent—"

She moved aside as the screen door burst open. A tall lanky puncher, with tawny hair dropping down over pleasant eyes, pushed through. His arms were clasped about a cardboard box of provisions. The pleasantness whipped out of his eyes, out of the lean cast of his brown face. His gaze was suddenly cold and brittle and wary on Lacey's face. Very slowly, deliberately, he placed the box down and straightened up. His body slouched forward a little, bringing the gun on his right hip up slightly.

Behind him another Circle H puncher appeared, arms loaded. His squat body pressed against the screen door, and stayed like that, the grin sliding from his tobacco stained face. He said, "Lacey!" His shoulders jerked a little. Then he was very still.

LACEY watched the lean puncher. The half smile of greeting faded from his lips, and his face went hard, hiding the wonder in him. He said, slowly, "Booger, we used to drink together, in Mason's. Me, you an' the kid—"

The puncher's face was grim. "I don't like to remember that, Lacey. Remember I ever drank with potshootin' killers!"

A thin flare leapt into Lacey's eyes. He had come a long way since morning. He was tired and dusty and dry, and he didn't like riddles. His shoulders set a little.

"Booger!" he said coldly. "Yo're ridin' an off color hoss. What's eatin' yuh?"

The lean puncher's lips curled. He started to push the tense girl slowly to one side, out of line. The squat figure shifted, moved away. Booger's voice rang clear, with a queer hate. "You know what's eatin' me, Lacey. Smiley rodded the Circle H, but he was more'n just boss to me. We shared blankets, grub an' luck together since we was both yearlin's, ridin' for the Pothook, on the Nueces. His score was mine, Lacey—an' by hell I'm figgerin' to even it—"

The girl came to life then. She grabbed his arm, crowded in front of him. "No, Booger! Not that! Not now!" She turned, her eyes blazing down at the suddenly slouched Lazy X trail boss. "That's what you'd want, isn't it? That's what you're after?" Her lips twisted contemptuously, but there was a dark hurt in her eyes she could not hide.

A slow surge of blood darkened Lacey's face. Her contempt bit deep, rankled, and he shoved his growing wonder aside. He was conscious only of a grim anger he could not explain. He said harshly, "Yeah, mebbe it is!"

The girl stiffened perceptibly, as if her words had been half a question, and the answer unexpected. Booger shifted, his brown face set. With his left hand he started to push the girl aside. . . .

But she held on to him. Her voice was uneven, pleading. "Booger! For my sake! However the outcome, it would be war! Range war! And it would be the Circle H starting it, openly, if you . . ." She caught herself, whirled back to Lacey. "That's what he's playin' for, Booger!"

She could feel the hardness of Booger's body, the iron of his arm. His face was cold, set grimly, and there were lights in his eyes. Over the girl's shoulder he met Lacey's smouldering gaze, and a corner of his lips moved. His voice was dust-dry, as he said, "I'll see you again, Lacey. On

my own. With no Circle H connections!"

Lacey shrugged. He was slouched, staring up at Helen Hunter. He said, "I'll be in town all day tomorrow, Booger." His voice was flat.

A hard, twisted smile crossed Booger's thin lips. He bent, picked up the box, followed the girl down the stairs. The jingle of bit irons broke the stilted stillness. The stairs creaked as the leathery-faced puncher followed.

Lacey watched them dump the boxes over the tailboard, swing around to the rail, mount saddle horses. Without looking back they rode out, one on either side of the slim, erect girl driving the buckboard.

The big trail-boss stood there by the steps, while the shadows thickened, became black. Feet scuffed uneasily in the quiet store. Then the black window square went yellow, and the harsh glow, hitting Lacey's face, showed hard brooding lines at his mouth. He reached for the Bull Durham sack without conscious thought, rolled a smoke by reflex. The red flare of the match against his face seemed to break the dark mood in him, and he relaxed back against the rail, trying to make sense out of something he couldn't fathom.

And he failed. His eyes crinkled, finally, and he straightened, snapped his butt into the street. Turning, he went up the shadowed steps of the Forty-Five Bar.

Chapter III

"THE LAW'S ASKING"

THE slatted doors buckled under the thrust of Lacey's arm. Smoke and light swirled against his hard face. The harsh mutter of unguarded voices, the undertone of clinking glasses, hit his ears. And then the sounds trickled away one by one, and a queer, stilted silence remained.

Lacey's eyes slid lazily over the long

barroom. Warning prickled the back of his neck, and his shoulders were suddenly loose, his stride balanced. The slow jingle of his Chihuahua spurs tapped the uneasy silence.

Men at the barline split away from him with hard, watchful deliberateness. Behind the bar, Jim Mason's blue-jowled moon face was white and set.

The Lazy X trail-boss hooked a careless arm over the bar, shoved his hat back from his sweaty forehead. His eyes leveled at the oxlike barman. He said, "It's the same Vic Lacey, Jim. But would you believe it?"

Mason shrugged. A queer struggle went on in his dark eyes. He reached out a huge, hairy hand, slid a bottle to the big trail boss. A glance followed. His eyes met Lacey's squarely. He said, "You been away a long time, Lacey."

Vic nodded, feeling tension build up swiftly in the still room. "All the way to Abilene," he said distinctly. A faint, hard grin edged his lips. "Gunnison has sure changed—"

The scraping chair cut his words. It came from behind him, and to one side, near the inner wall. A voice rode on the tail of that scraping chair: "Seen thet kid pard of yourn lately, Lacey?"

Some quality in the voice, a sneering belligerency, rode the big puncher, tightened his mouth. He turned lightly. On either side of him, at the bar, men edged away.

The black-shirted hombre who had rasped the question was as tall as Lacey. The brim of a black sombrero, tipped over a sharp, weathered face, veiled eyes that were Apache slanted, and as cruel. A star glinted on his breast pocket. The guns that were set low at hips were slick handled.

Lacey's eyes dropped to that star and thinned with queer intentness. Inside him warning rang again, stirring his dark mood. He was being ridden, forced into some-

thing he knew nothing about. He had come back to Gunnison to find it on the prod; that much he knew. His gaze took in the slouched men at the card table where the black-shirted deputy had been seated; noted the cold slant of hard faces.

He said, bleakly, "Is it the star askin', Rooks? Or just yore big mouth?"

The silence hung flat. The black-shirted deputy took two easy steps forward and to the left, leaving his companions a clear view of Lacey. His bony face was tight, faintly sneering, in the lamp wash.

"It's the law that's askin', Lacey. An' a rope that's waitin'!" The sneer ran thin down the left side of his mouth and his eyes narrowed warningly. "Forty feet of rope for a rustlin' polecat named Brent Taylor. An' for any Lazy X waddies that're backin'—"

Lacey grinned mirthlessly. He took two swift steps forward, and hooked his right fist, with the full pivot of his heavy shoulders, into Rooks' sneering mouth. The lawman was spun back off his feet. He hit the round card table with his chest, skimmed over it, and went down on top of a hard-faced man who was trying to lunge aside. The table followed. A lean, wiry hombre in town clothes spun fast, away from the wreckage, jerking at a shoulder holster.

Lacey's gun roared. The wiry gent tipped around, went down with the overturned table. The other jasper stiffened, let his gun hand drop. He looked into Lacey's steady gun muzzle, his lips twitching. The gunshot faded slowly, and only a man's cursing sounded, monotonously. . . .

The big Lazy X trail-boss, balanced forward on his toes, sneered dangerously. "Any one else takin' cards in this game?"

THE voice in the doorway was heavy, metallic. "I'm callin', Lacey! Put up that gun!"

Lacey's shirt snapped tight across his broad shoulders. The overhead lamp gut-

tered once, loudly, and then Lacey shoved his gun into holster. He turned, slowly, flicked hard eyes toward the door.

The man just inside the batwings was broad, heavy-thewed. He had stolid features and pale eyes under a thatch of straw hair. Deep lines ran from his purple-veined nose to the corner of his harsh mouth. The gun in his fist was cocked, and the badge on his open vest was very shiny.

Lacey's eyes narrowed to the pull of his thoughts. Block Edman, sheriff. Rooks, a deputy. Four months had changed Gunnison completely. For Edman had been Sheriff Tim Bailey's deputy when Lacey had pointed a Lazy X trail herd for Abilene. And Rooks had been a hard, gun-fast hanger-on at Jerry's Pool & Bar.

The cursing man got up off the floor, pushing aside the overturned table. Rooks lay face down beside a chair. He wasn't moving. The wiry jasper was sitting on the floor, holding his left hand to his shoulder. Blood crept through his fingers. His mouth was twisted in pained grimace.

The sheriff said, "You got anythin' to say, Lacey?"

Lacey eased. "Mebbe *you* kin tell me, Block," he growled. "I been pushed around since I hit town. I'm a Lazy X rider—an' Brent Taylor is my bunkie. Just now that seems to add up to somethin' plum unpleasant." He shifted, dropped his gaze to the unconscious deputy. "I hit Rooks with my fist. His friends horned in. . . ." He shrugged.

Edman scowled. Behind the big trail-boss Mason said, "That's the way it was, Block. I reckon mebbe we all been addin' two an' two kinda hasty. Just 'cause the kid went bad ain't no reason—"

The sheriff's pale eyes clouded. He said, "Mebbe," and twisted his huge shoulders around. Rooks was stirring, pushing up to one knee, shaking his head. Blood spattered on the floor.

The sheriff swung back to Lacey. "You been away a long time, Vic. *Where?*"

Lacey frowned. "Let's quit playin' riddles, Block. I been up north with a trail herd. You kin check with Sandy on that. I left the boys at Abilene an' cut northwest on Lazy X business. I got back not an hour ago, an' ran into plumb proddy gents, anxious to get their guns smokin'. It's yore turn now, Block. *Why?*"

The sheriff scowled. His pale eyes slid over watching men. His hard mouth twisted. "I'm takin' yore word, Lacey, that you been up The Trail. But me an' Rooks knew you an' the kid were close. You came into the valley together, two years back; yuh never mentioned from where. But from the first that kid pard of yours was wild; like a stud that can't be broke. He was ridin' the right side of the fence, Lacey, but I seen his kind before. They don't belong. Sooner or later he'd shift over—an' he did. *You* was his closest friend—"

Lacey's face had gone stony. He said tightly, "The kid went bad, Block?"

THE sheriff nodded. Over by the overturned table Rooks surged erect. His lips were puffed. Blood dribbled slowly down his swelling jaw, made dark stains on his shirt, his star. He swayed, shoved one hand down to the overturned table to steady himself. He swore thickly, his glazed eyes trying to focus on the man who had hit him.

"Take care of 'im, Reed," the sheriff snapped to the squint-eyed man who had gone down with Rooks. "See that he don't start anythin'. You, Galt, better see the doc about that shoulder, right away." He waited till the wiry man passed through the batwings before turning and facing Lacey.

His voice was hard. "Lacey, I been fightin' trouble since you left. It started with Sheriff Bailey's killin', over by Long Creek way. That was the first hint we had Seelong's bunch was in the hills. We didn't have to wait long, after. The Circle H an'

the smaller spreads along the river have been losin' cows in bunches. An' about that time that bobcat pard of your joined 'em."

Lacey was stiff, his back against the bar, listening. He nodded a little woodenly. "Go on!" he muttered.

The sheriff shrugged. "It all started that afternoon Frank Hunter warned you an' Brent away from his daughter. The kid took to drinkin'. Then, about a week later, right here in Mason's, he an' Hunter had words. The kid was lit. He pulled a gun on Hunter. Smiley stepped between them an' knocked the kid cold.

"Brent quit the Lazy X that same night. Joined up with Seelong. He's been seen more'n once with 'em. But the worse happened last week, when Seelong's bunch ran over fifty head of Circle H beef off the range an' killed Spud doin' it. The Circle H came to town for the law. We followed the polecats to Coyote Butte, where they split. Smiley an' a coupla townmen I swore in as depities rode with me an' Rooks. Booger took the rest north, along the other trail."

The sheriff's shoulders lifted again, in hard gesture. "We were drygulched, up by the Needles. Smiley got it first. I saw young Taylor plain behind the rifle that got him. We didn't have a chance. My hoss was shot from under me, an' Rogan, who useta work in Hayes' store, got his head near blowed off. Rooks an' Galt, the other townman with us, had fallen behind, an' they got out of the mess without a scratch. Around midnight Booger an' his part of the posse drifted back to town. They had lost their bunch away over by the Roolvag Sinks. Booger swore . . ."

The sheriff's heavy voice droned on with the gruesome details.

But Lacey wasn't hearing. He was thinking about a wild kid he had known—a hard, self-sufficient youngster who had been kicked around by life since he had

been old enough to walk—and had never forgotten. Youngster like that grew up, riding on the thin edge of law and order, and then something happened, and they turned bad. It had happened that way with Brent.

But one thing in Edman's story stuck in Lacey's mind. He said, "You say Brent was in that ambushin' party? The kid got Smiley—like that? Without givin' him the ghost of a chance?"

The sheriff scowled. But it was Rooks who answered. The deputy broke free of Reed's detaining hands, shook black hair out of blazing eyes. "Yeah!" he snarled thickly. "It was that kid pard of yourn, Lacey. A yeller-bellied, murderin' polecat. Damn you, Block kin swaller that yarn about *you* bein' away on trail drive. *I ain't*. I'm figgerin' you an' the kid rode with Seelong way back, an' yo're ridin' with him again! What yore game is, comin' into town, I don't know. An' I don't give a damn!"

His lean body quivered with the rage in him. There was murder in his eyes, unveiled, unchecked. "I'm wearin' this star 'cause Block asked me. He needed fast guns to buck Seelong, an' I took the job. But I'm not hidin' behind it, Lacey. I'm gonna take it off, soon's my job's finished. *An' then I'm gonna look you up!*"

"**E**ASY, Rooks!" Block snapped. His gaze whipped back to Lacey. "Rooks is kinda riled but he'll get over it. But I'm warnin' yuh, Vic: keep outta town till this mess's settled. Stay at the Lazy X!"

Lacey's face was hard and angry. "No!" he snapped. "I'm ridin' back tomorrer. Me an' the kid was close, Block. An' I'm gonna find him. If he is ridin' with Seelong, an' was in that ambush . . . ?" His jaw ridged and little lines crawled around his mouth.

"But first I'm gonna give a couple of loud-mouthed polecats a chance to back their guntalk. Since I hit town I been

shoved around like I was some tinhorn killer. I don't like bein' shoved around, law or no law—"

Rooks started forward. The sheriff stepped in front of him, but he shoved him aside. He stopped in front of Lacey, his swollen face ugly. "That's the way it is, Lacey. I'll be lookin' for you in town. Tomorrow!"

Lacey nodded, shortly. "Tomorrow, Rooks!" His gaze flicked to Reed and the other hombre who had been with Rooks at the table. "Call out yore friends, too. You'll need 'em!"

Rooks's thin lips twisted. But he turned on his heel, went out. The sheriff stood in the center of the saloon, pale eyes snapping. "You called that one, Lacey. Mebbe that's what you came to town for. To raise this rumpus." He sneered, openly, the gun in his fist very steady. "I could jail you for this, or just on suspicion. Mebbe I should. But I'm gonna warn yuh once more. Stay clear of Gunnison. If you don't—if you take Rooks, tomorrow—you'll have to take me, too. Get it? Me, too—an' I don't think yo're that good, Lacey!"

Lacey grinned contemptuously. "Seems like I got a full schedule."

"A lead schedule!" the sheriff snapped. He walked backward slowly, till his broad shoulders touched the batwings, his eyes on the Lazy X trail boss. "Take my tip, Lacey. Remember, stay out of town tomorrow!"

The batwings flapped easily after him. The silence hung like a thick, palpable thing in the saloon. Lacey shrugged finally, a dark, bitter light in his eyes. His spurs jingled as he turned to the bar, poured out a drink.

The stark tension broke then, and noise flooded the long barroom, a jarring clamor after the long stillness. Mason eased back against the shelves and let out a long breath.

"Holy hell!" he said. And meant it.

Chapter IV

GUN TALK ON THE CIRCLE H

STARS were thick in the sky when Lacey loped out of Gunnison. He cut west at the fork and took the rougher but shorter cut to the Lazy X. The trail lay through Circle H land.

The black under him pounded on with easy stride, though it had come over forty miles since dawn. The big man rode slouched in saddle, unaware of his riding, of the stiffness that claimed his rangy frame. His eyes were gray slits, revealing little of the grim mood in him. He had not been prepared for this. He had broken camp eagerly that morning, facing the last long stretch of his homeward journey gladly, somehow impatient to get back among friends. The change in Gunnison, in the Circle H, was a bitter shock—and he wrestled with grim thoughts as he rode, unseeing, through the darkened range-land.

The trail curved sharply ahead, dipped down through willows. The soft gurgle of running water reached through his thoughts, and he straightened a little.

Buffalo Creek! He was close to the Circle H buildings here. Moonlight seeped thinly over the broken country, touching ramparts of stone that sided the rough trail. Lacey leaned forward, and a little sidewise to glimpse the lights of the Hunter ranchhouse. . .

That move saved his life.

An invisible slug raked a bloody path over his left eye. He was jerked sidewise, and the suddenly rearing black threw him. The heavy roar of a rifle was dim in his head as he fell. Instinctively he kicked loose from stirrups. His right shoulder hit the trail first, and then his head, thwacking solidly against an imbedded rock. He lay still, a huddled figure in the shadows shrouding the trail. The black pony lunged on.

Up on the cliff wall a figure moved. A rifle glinted briefly in the moonlight. The figure started to move down toward the sprawled puncher. It paused, stared toward the Circle H buildings, plainly seen from the cliff. For a moment it hung, debating whether it had time to make sure of the man it had dry-gulched. It figured not, for it twisted back, went in a swift run in the opposite direction, scrambled down a wedge split in the rocks. The clatter of hoofs was barely audible, moments later, fading away to the south. . .

Lacey rolled over, pushed up to hands and knees. He stood like that, dazed, shaking blood from his eyes. Awareness came in a rush, and he surged erect, fell into an unsteady crouch, a gun sliding by reflex into his right hand. With his left he wiped his eyes, tried to peer toward the cliff. He cursed softly as nothing moved, and concluded that the potshooter had been satisfied with his first shot.

He eased, dropped his gun back to holster. His face was drawn. His head throbbed painfully and he wiped blood from his eyes with a handkerchief as he peered again at that dimly lit rock mass. "Luck," he muttered, thinking of his bending forward at the right instant. "Blind luck!"

He started for the murmuring creek, thinking to wet his handkerchief, tie it over the ragged furrow in his head. The rumble of hoofs stopped him. His eyes went frosty as he stepped silently back into the shadows.

Water splashed under driving hoofs. Willows bent to the passage of riders. Dark shapes came surging up the bank. Once on the moon-splashed trail they spread out, made a wedge. Horses minced warily. The pale moonglow fell across hard, tense faces.

Lacey frowned, dropped his hands away from his guns. He stepped out of the shadows, onto the trail.

That grim wedge stopped, abruptly. Hands dropped to holstered weapons.

Lacey raised his right hand, snapped, "Hold it, Hunter!"

FRANK HUNTER, at the apex of the wedge, stilled his big palomino. Four of his riders flanked him, a grim crew on that trail. Booger was one of them. Hostility was naked in his eyes as he saw Lacey.

Hunter looked down at the bloody-faced man blocking the trail. He was hard, this old-timer, and tolerance was not one of his virtues. Once his mind ran one way it ran deep; it took dynamite to turn it. Events of the past weeks had hit him hard, and he thought he knew whom to blame.

His voice snapped harshly. "What you doin' on Circle H land, Lacey? Lookin' for yore murderin' sidekick?"

Anger whipped across Lacey's cheeks. "No!" His voice was flat. "I'm lookin' for a potshootin' killer—on Circle H land!"

Hunter leaned forward over the pommel, his face darkening. Booger edged his cayuse into plain view of the big, slouched Lazy X man. The old rancher rasped, "Meanin'?"

"Any way you want to take it?" Lacey snapped. His head throbbed like hell, and the mood of these men, their hostility, reacted on him. They were like strangers, these riders he had once known well.

He saw anger roil up in Hunter's eyes, like a red-waving flag. The old man's seamed cheeks flattened, his shoulders stiffened. He said, "I don't like rustlers on my land, Lacey. When we see 'em we shoot 'em—or hang 'em!"

Lacey grinned coldly, his gray eyes bits of steel. His arms hung loose at his sides, dangerously so. He could hear the pound of another rider, coming fast, splashing through the creek. Another Circle H rider, no doubt. He said, "Go to hell, Hunter!"

Hunter stiffened. For a split second silence gripped that group. And in that moment a rider shot among them, spin-

ning a little gray mare around in a dust-raising stop.

A high-crowned gray hat, held by a soft woven cord, had slipped from Helen Hunter's hair, and lay back on soft, slim shoulders. Her face was white and blurred as she crowded the gray against her father's fidgety palomino. A small quick hand stayed Hunter's draw.

"Father, no!" Her fingers tightened on his arm. "Haven't we had enough of killing—or . . ." Her voice faded into a ragged whisper that told of frayed, excited nerves.

A taut silence built up on that trail, and held in it, like something apart. Helen was sobbing. Hunter slowly pulled himself together. His eyes met Lacey's squarely. "You kin thank yore lucky stars," he rasped, "that my daughter saved yore worthless hide."

Lacey surveyed the hostile faces before him, came to rest coldly, almost insolently, on Hunter's. "Not mine," he said evenly. "But yourn!" And there was something in his voice that was convincing.

Hunter jerked away from his daughter. His right arm waved stiffly and rage tore at his wiry frame. "Git!" he ripped out. "An' tell that two-faced boss of yourn I'm shootin' the next Lazy X man I find on my land. That goes for all his thievin' crew, an' him too! Tell him I'll get that money before my note comes due, somehow—an' *when* I do I'm ridin' over an' rammin' it down his double-crossin' throat! Tell him, Lacey!"

The big puncher nodded soberly. He whistled sharply, waited for his black to appear. His anger simmered down as he waited, and a glimmer of reason began to break through the throbbing in his head. He mounted stiffly, jerked the black's head around and stared into Helen Hunter's dark eyes.

She was a pretty thing, sitting that gray's saddle, auburn hair sheened by moonlight. Quite frankly he admitted she

was more than pretty, and his old feeling stirred in him and lived momentarily in his appraising eyes.

Then his shoulders moved. "So that's the way you want it, Hunter? You know what that means? What any range war means?"

Hunter was stiff, holding back his anger. "We didn't start it!" he snapped. "But we're gonna finish it. Even if I have to send for riders that kin sling a gun and mean it!"

Lacey's face hardened. "Yo're playin' a fool's game, Hunter," he said coldly. "But it's yore game!"

He swung the black around, sent it lunging ahead down the shadow-shrouded trail.

Chapter V

GUN FOOL'S ERRAND

THE LAZY X was a big sprawling outfit wedged in the fork of Willow Creek and its smaller tributary, the Buffalo. The big yard was traced with shadows and silence. Light glowed through the ranchhouse windows. It stayed on, but the bunkhouse suddenly went dark as Lacey rode in. Lacey, swinging about, sensed the bunkhouse door open a crack; felt the grim regard of muzzles.

Then the ranchhouse door banged open. Sandy himself came out to the wide porch, the yellow glare from within outlining his burly figure to the rider in the yard. He paused on the top step, eyes narrowing on Lacey's shadowy form. His thumb was hooked in a wide, gunless belt. For a long moment he peered, his face grim. Then the grimness faded.

"Vic Lacey, by Gawd!" he greeted. His voice was a rumble, fitting his enormous chest. "I was beginnin' to wonder about you, Vic. Come on in!"

The tension in the bunkhouse faded. Men came out, craggy faces showing com-

radeship. The hardness left Lacey's eyes. At least the old outfit was the same. He grinned his greetings, unconsciously searching each face and feeling a queer disappointment as he missed Brent's hard, reckless countenance.

Sandy caught something of his trailboss' feelings. His voice held regret. "The kid ain't here, Vic. I'll tell you about it inside."

The big living room fitted the old, one time buffalo hunter. Shaggy bull heads and pelts ornamented the untrimmed log walls, lay deep underfoot. Big and sprawling, it had never known the touch of a woman's hand. The odor of stale tobacco seemed part of the very furnishings. A shaded oil lamp sat on the heavy oak table, casting light in a downward circle. A smaller circle of brightness lay on the ceiling directly over it. The room had that semi-dark effect some men like.

Sandy deposited his big frame in a sturdy, home-built chair, just beyond the table. The light reflected into his grizzled, tobacco-stained face. Lacey's features were in the shadows, but he knew what was troubling the big puncher.

Vic fumbled in his shirt, unbuckled a soft leathery money belt. He threw it carelessly on the table. His voice was level, disinterested. "Malone'll take everythin' we deliver, at the same price. He got that Government contract, an' needs beef. Said somethin' about you an' Hunter gettin' together on the next drive. . ."

Sandy shrugged, didn't even look at the money. He said, "Yo're wonderin' about Brent, Lacey?"

Lacey's voice was grim. "I passed through Gunnison. It was all over town!"

Sandy eased back in his chair. He dug out his pipe. "I'm glad you know, Vic. I didn't know how to tell you." He filled his pipe thoughtfully, crimping tobacco into the bowl with a big, horny thumb. "I'm sorry the kid turned out like that. I liked the youngster."

Lacey was stiff. "You figgerin' he killed Smiley—the way they're talkin'?"

Sandy frowned. "I—don't know. When a kid like that goes bad. . ." He shrugged, his lips twisting. "There's been hell ridin' the Coyote ranges since you left, Vic. Hell an' death. The Circle H's on edge an' plumb trigger-itchy. There's talk spreadin' of a range war. The talk has it the Lazy X's backin' Seelong's wide-loopers, that I want to get the Circle H on a note I hold of Hunter's by makin' it impossible for him to raise cash. Hell, I only bought that note from the bank to save the old fool from goin' into a hole. When the war talk started, just after the kid left the Lazy X. . ."

He shrugged again. "I tried to get to Hunter before it spread too far." His face hardened at the memory. "I was warned away at gunpoint. I didn't see Hunter."

"I did!" Lacey's tone was flat. He leaned forward over the table. "I just come from Circle H land, took the short cut. Some polecat figgered it would be smart if I was found dead on the Circle H. When I come to, Hunter was comin' up the trail with some of his waddies. We had words. He told me to tell you special he's gonna shoot the next Lazy X rider caught on his land. An' thet when he gets the money for thet note he's gonna lead drive it down yore throat!"

Sandy's big fists clenched. He stood like that a long moment, the smoke curling up over his grizzled face. "I was afraid it would come to that," he rumbled softly. "Everythin' that's happened has been workin' to thet end. That's what I wanted to tell Hunter!"

Lacey shrugged. "It's Brent I'm thinkin' most of, right now. He's in the middle of this, somewhere. Some polecats are figgerin' on a range fracas between the Circle H an' the Lazy X to clean up. But I can't figger Brent behind it at all. Even after what happened between him an' Hunter. He's wild, with a hair-trigger

temper an' a stiff sort of pride. But there was some things about the kid only I knew, Sandy. One of 'em is Brent wouldn't have dry-gulched Smiley, the way the story's got it. An' if he didn't, then our *new* sheriff an' his depity are liars! *Why?*"

Slowly the big trail-boss eased. His eyes narrowed. "I'm gonna find out, Sandy. I'm quittin' the outfit tonight, so's anythin' I do won't pull you deeper into this mess." His hand lifted to the ragged cut over his eyes, bound by a clean handkerchief. "Somewhere in this tangle I'm gonna meet a potshootin' polecat."

Sandy rose heavily. He came around the table to Lacey. "You don't have to quit the outfit, Vic. I back my men—always have. I'm backin' you with the hull damn spread, if you need it. Good luck!"

Vic gripped his extended hand. "Thanks, Sandy."

GUNNISON stirred warily under the early morning sun. For long years a peaceful cowtown, recent events had jerked it free of its drowsy complacency, washed memory of earlier, hard-bitten boom days to the surface. The grim threat of Seelong and his high-line riders, quartered in the broken hills past Coyote Butte, seemed to lurk in the very atmosphere.

Into this tension-held town came Vic Lacey, jogging his rested black. A small pack rode his cante; there was food for a week in the saddlebags.

Grimly he paced the bronc down the wide street, his gaze flickering to the 'dobe law office. But there was no movement within it.

He dismounted without hurry, tied up at the rack across from the building. He waited, rolling a cigarette. Waited for Rooks to show up, to back his loud-mouthed talk of the night before.

Rooks did not appear. A hard sneer rode Lacey's lips. He turned, walked leisurely to the Forty-Five Bar. He had one

drink, came out. He lounged around till the sun was close to meridian. Little heat devils danced out on the range.

He grinned contemptuously. He went back to the waiting black, his stride loose, balanced. He had given Rooks plenty of time to back his gun talk. He was through waiting. . .

He untied the black, started around. His roving gaze lifted to the range trail—caught something. Very slowly he stepped back, dropped the reins over the pole rack.

The jogging puncher loomed up, unhurriedly. The sun washed his lean figure, the set of wiry shoulders.

Booger was taking up his gun challenge!

A thin crease of regret fled across Lacey's face. He knew, now, why Booger had acted as he did. But he had been called out; he couldn't back out now.

He waited, with that dark stir of impatience rising in him. He had to get going. He had to ride into the hills, face the kid he had looked on as a brother. He didn't know yet what he would do when he found him. His mood was a dark, uncertain thing, driving him into the hills—as if he, somehow, was responsible for what had happened to Brent.

His gaze swung back to the lithe Circle H puncher. Booger was swinging down by the rail of the Two Spot, five buildings uptown. He tied his animal, turned, eased his back against the rail. His eyes found Lacey, held.

Along the wide, trampled street the sun fell with harsh, brassy glare. But somehow, at this moment, it seemed cold, still. Little groups of men appeared in doorways, well out of the area of impending action.

Lacey shrugged. A little jerkily, Booger moved away from the rail. He started for Lacey. His feet shuffled, kicked up little dust puffs behind his long-roweled spurs.

Regret beat harshly in Lacey. He turned slightly and caught a glimpse of Rooks, crowded behind Block Edman in the door-

way of the law office. And the grin that touched Lacey's lips was contemptuous and cold.

Rooks was waiting for Booger's play.

He stepped away from his cayuse. His stride was short. He kept thinking of young Brent as he walked. He wondered if Booger, perhaps, was right. If the sheriff's story was on the level.

Muscles ridged and faded in his dark cheeks. His lips flattened to hard line. Booger was close now. He could see the Circle H puncher's hard, brown face, the thin streak of white-pressed lips.

Something turned over in Lacey's stomach. Hell, he had hoorawed and sang with Booger four months back. And now—

Booger paused, his weight on his toes. Fifteen feet of sun and dust hung between them—and death!

His lean face was bitter, slightly twisted. He said, "The Circle H ain't in this at all, Lacey. I quit this mornin'. I'm doin' this on my own—payin' Smiley's debt." His voice seemed to break off sharp; there was a streak of silence. Then a pent up fury broke through, rang in his snarling voice. "Damn you, Lacey—*throw yore gun!*"

His right hand jerked gunward with the challenge. He twisted, tried to lunge aside, shoot—all in the same flashing move. From Lacey's suddenly crouching form a long-barreled Colt spat wickedly. The Circle H rider's gun seemed to jerk in his fist, tear free.

For a split second Booger crouched, looking unbelievably down to the gun he had lost. Then his eyes lifted to Lacey, and his thin lips twisted. "Shoot, you damn—"

Lacey said, "No—"

Booger jumped for his glinting Colt. Lacey stepped in, fast, jammed his boot down. Booger twisted violently, and Lacey caught his gun arm. The Colt roared heavily between them. Lacey's shoulders heaved. He jerked free. His left arm

whipped around, smashed a bony fist into Booger's snarling face.

Booger spun back on his heels and went down. Lacey stood in the street center. The slug had ripped across his thigh, shearing his pants, gouging a shallow cut that burned, began to bleed.

Chapter VI

SPLIT TRAILS

THE SUN burned against the road dust.

Booger stirred, pawed the ground, heaved to his feet. Lacey picked up the lean puncher's gun, held it lax in his fist. His voice was cold, even. "I'm sorry I had to do it, Booger. But you've been ridin' a mistake hard—you've given me no chance to explain."

Booger sneered. There was blood on his twisted lips, streaking his chin. His eyes were bitter.

Lacey's mouth hardened. "I ain't explainin' now, Booger! I'm tellin' you! An' you kin take it or leave it! I ain't with the kid. I didn't know anythin' about the mess till last night. I came to town this mornin', on my way through into the hills. I'm goin' in after Brent. I picked up that kid when he could barely sit a hoss. I grew up with him, an' some things about him mebbe only I know. That's why I got to see him—got to face him. An' if he did drygulch Smiley. . ."

The smile Lacey drew across his lips was a bleak, bitter thing.

Doubt put a crease between Booger's eyes. But the hard bitterness of this big rider's voice cinched things in him and he shrugged. "Reckon I'll ride with you, Lacey. I quit the spread this mornin'. I was aimin' to head into the hills for the kid myself, if I got by yore gun!"

He grinned coldly. "I feel like a heel, Lacey. I left Hunter shorthanded. Four men guardin' over four hundred head we been gatherin' up in Owl Springs Hollow.

Hunters' got riders comin' up from Austin, but. . ." He shrugged.

Lacey was staring west, not hearing. His gaze was brooding on the dark, towering bulk of Coyote Butte. He said, slowly, "There's Seelong's bunch in those canyons, Booger. An' Brent." He turned, looked at the lean, bruised-lipped puncher. A hard grin pulled at his mouth as he handed Booger his gun. His shoulders moved in an easy shrug. "Let's drink on it, Booger."

The sun had moved an hour through the sky when they came through the batwings. Lacey's gaze slid to the law office as he paused, hitched at his sagging belts. The cut on his thigh had been washed and bandaged. The strip of white, blood-stained cloth showed through the rip in his pants as he moved.

Sheriff Edman was still in the doorway, a blocky figure filling the entrance. Lacey noted that Rooks was no longer in sight, and he grinned coldly.

He was starting down the steps when Booger's quick hand stopped him. The puncher's voice snapped, "Somethin's busted loose, Lacey! Those riders—thet's Hunter an' the boys. . ."

Lacey swung around. His eyes narrowed against the blazing sun, picked up the riders rocketing into town. Dust puffed up to hang like a thin dry veil behind them.

It was Hunter! The Circle H owner came pounding down the street, quirting a wild-eyed palomino. Three men trailed him. Tight brown faces showed through swirling dust.

They slammed to a halt in front of the sheriff's office. Lacey followed Booger down, a frown hooking his brows. Men popped out of doorways, trailed toward the growing cluster by the law building.

Hunter's hard voice whipped harshly, striking above the sounds of scuffing feet. ". . . four hundred head, Edman! This'll wipe me out if they get away with it. That bobcat, Brent, was with 'em! Burke

saw him ridin' up front with Seelong himself. Burke's at the house now, with Helen tendin' his busted shoulder!"

The sheriff's heavy voice snapped, "I'll round up a posse hight away, Hunter!" His tone shifted to someone in the crowd. "Get Rooks! He's in Jerry's. Tell him to bring some men who kin handle a gun!"

His voice whipped back to the impatient Circle H owner. "Mebbe we'll gun tally 'em this time, Hunter. But it's damn bad country beyond the butte. Them canyons are made for dry-gulchin'—"

Hunter's voice ripped out grimly. "I can't afford to lose them beeves, Edman. An' I ain't got enough men to tackle Seelong in the hills. That's why I came to town for the law. But I ain't askin' anyone to ride that don't—"

He stiffened, his words shearing off as Lacey crowded forward. For a bleak instant uncertainty lay across his dark, sweaty face. Then his weight surged up into his stirrups, and a bitter fury lashed into his red rimmed eyes.

"Yo're a long way from yore friends, Lacey!" he snarled. "Mebbe yo're figgerin'—"

"I'm figgerin' to ride with you, Hunter!" Lacey finished coldly. His shoulders were loose. His gaze shifted from Hunter to the sheriff's suddenly still face. "I want to be in on the necktie party—when you run down Seelong!"

Hunter scowled. His wrinkled eyes were hard on the big trail-boss' face, as if trying to guess at Lacey's meaning. Then impatience rolled up in him, and he nodded grimly. "Sure. I want to see yore face, Lacey—when the kid swings. . ."

THE POSSE pounded out of Gunnison, a long, grim line of hard-faced riders. The sun slanted its rays over the rolling short-grass range that gradually gave way to harsher, broken country.

Booger rode at Lacey's left stirrup, four lengths behind the leaders. The sheriff

was up front on a long-paced sorrel, flanked by Hunter on his right and Rooks on his left.

Lacey smiled grimly. Evidently Rooks had forgotten his gun talk of the night before. The black-shirted deputy had kept away from Lacey as the posse had gathered.

Coyote Butte threw its long shadow over them, its high red walls throwing back in muffled echo the pound of their hoofs. North of that barrier the badlands began—a twisted, brooding stretch of hell in the daytime, and treacherous going at night.

They hit sign here, freshly-trampled ground. Hunter's beeves had passed this way not three hours back, being driven hard. Careful study of the ground ascertained nine men were running the beeves into the badlands.

The posse swung north with that fresh trail. The shadows began to lengthen over the wild land. The sun dropped to a huge red ball on the horizon.

Then the trail split! Strangely. Four men and the cattle veered west again. Continuing on, northward, were the plain tracks of five horses.

The posse clustered about the sheriff. Edman's voice snapped orders. "We'll split, like the last time. Rooks, Reed, Jingle an' two or three others come with me. I'm takin' the west trail. There's only four men with the beeves, Hunter. We'll handle 'em easy this time—"

Hunter snapped, "I'm stickin' to my beeves! Supposin' you run into another ambushin' party?"

"Four men!" The blocky sheriff sneered. "If I can't handle that I'll give up my star, Hunter!" He shifted, ranged light eyes over the crowded riders. "Who's comin' with me?"

Lacey's face was expressionless, hiding a growing suspicion. Reed and Jingle, crowding around Rooks, were the same hard-faced gents who, with Galt, had been

in the Forty-Five Bar last night. Hard-case gents, not generally found riding to save other men's beeves.

A sudden urge inside him made him ride forward. "I'm goin' with you, Block. Mebbe Brent's with the bunch herdin' Hunter's cows." His lips twisted grimly. "I want to see if the kid'll take a pot-shot at me—the way he got Smiley!"

The sheriff stiffened, his eyes clouding. Beside him, Rooks sneered.

Booger drew up alongside. The lean puncher's face was cold. "I'm taggin' along, Sheriff. For the same reason!"

Hunter shrugged, his eyes brittle. "This is the second time they've split up, Edman. I wasn't with the posse the first time. But I don't like the looks of things at all." His cayuse minced as he ran his eyes over the diverging tracks. "Damn it, Sheriff—five men cuttin' off, headin' north! Why?"

Edman scowled. "How in hell do I know?" he snapped. "But we're losin' lots of valuable time, arguin' Splittin' up is *their* mistake. That gives you eleven men to their five." His eyes ranged in swift count over the riders clustered about him. "An' us seven to four." He waved his arm in a sharp gesture, swinging his sorrel around in rearing turn. "Let's get goin'!"

Chapter VII

GUNS OF TREACHERY

SHADOWS claimed the jumbled land. The terrain grew wilder, drier. Rock pinnacles lifted up to the darkening sky, sharply chiseled by the sands of aeons. Mesquite darkened the arroyos and greasewood fought for existence in rocky crevices. Ahead of them, low down in the sky, the evening star winked like a beckoning beacon.

And here, miles west of Coyote Butte, the trail vanished. Straight to a rocky stretch of hardpan the broad path beaten by the stolen cattle led. After that—noth-

ing! The stony stretch lay in the dusk, like some giant erasure, sneering at the huddle of riders that pulled up at its edge.

Edman turned. His face was hard. He seemed to study Lacey. He said, "Looks like we're stumped." He waved a broad arm in wide sweep. "Hunter's beeves could have been swung off anywhere, without leavin' a trace."

Booger shifted. "We ain't givin' up this easy, sheriff. Mebbe there's softer ground ahead. Ground that'll show which way they headed."

Edman shrugged. They rode on, silent, grim. Lacey rode lax, feeling something in the air—feeling menace in the sheriff's broad frame. The posse was drawing apart, almost unconsciously. Rooks, Jingle and Reed were bunched up with Edman. Booger and young Wayne, the blacksmith's son, crowded Lacey.

The sky darkened. Wind stirred through that jumbled, hot land. The low clop of hoofs seemed to rift a deep silence that brooded under the pale stars.

Lacey looked forward in that darkness, his mind on the kid who had ridden with him up from the Border. He seemed to see young Brent's dark, bitter features, see the quick restless curl of lips—and the vision faded into that of a dangling figure. The sharp thrust of pain in Lacey was like a knife, drawing his mouth into a tortured line.

It was Booger who cut sign first. The keen-eyed puncher suddenly crowded his horse around, lifted an arm. "Hoss tracks, Sheriff!"

The others bunched around him. Faint starlight lay cold and wan about them, revealing hoof tracks in the softer soil that marked the ending of the stony stretch.

Lacey's tone was grim. "Four riders, headin' north again!" His gaze lifted to Edman's scowling features. "There's somethin' smelly about this, Block—damn smelly. First nine men split up, for no other reason than to break up the posse.

Then the four we trail run Hunter's beeves over a stretch of stony ground that don't leave no sign at all. An' now—"His voice flattened. "Now we find tracks of four cayuses, headin' north! *But there's no sign of Hunter's cows!*"

Edman straightened. His thick figure was hard, slouched, in the dusk. Rooks crowded him, his bruised lips twisted in a hard sneer. The Apache-eyed deputy seemed to be waiting only for a signal. . . .

Booger's cold voice cut in. "The whole setup's damn queer, Sheriff. But let's quit this squabblin'. There's a sign of four of 'em—plain as hell! One of those four might be Brent. *I'm* trailin' north!"

The sheriff scowled. There was silence, then—a cold, suddenly tense silence that tightened Lacey's shoulders, edged suspicion up into his narrowed eyes. Behind the sheriff, Jingle and Reed were stiff—waiting!

Then Edman nodded. "Mebbe it's best, at that. Hunter's beeves mighta been run off into one of those box canyons we passed, an' left there while they try to shake us off. We can always come back for 'em, after!"

Lacey's lips curled. The whole thing didn't make sense. Rustlers running off a herd didn't leave it behind to be picked up later. His eyes were hard, watchful, as he wheeled his cayuse, followed the others north.

THOSE four rustlers knew the country. The trail led deep into the badlands in as twisted and wild a passage as Lacey had ever followed. They were climbing now, following a trail up along a tawny hill shoulder that shut off the eastern sky. To Lacey's right the slope pitched in steep angle, bush-clothed and dark. To his left an outcropping of shale made a sheer vertical barrier.

Lacey eased forward in the saddle, his eyes slitting. The mountain trail was narrowing, forcing them into single file. Warn-

ing hammered hard at the Lazy X rider. Rooks and his two companions had dropped behind. Young Wayne, a little uneasy, was crowding close to Lacey's black. Three lengths ahead, Booger led the sheriff.

Lacey's gaze jumped up to the dark notch that loomed against the sky. *Ambush!* He felt it, the threat of it, like a reptile crawling through him. There was something in the very stillness—something. . . .

He glanced back, a sharp sense of danger suddenly lifting the hackles of his neck. And for just an instant his rangy frame shocked with surprise. Then he whipped sidewise and down out of saddle, grim realization hit him.

Behind him Rooks was leveling a gun, murder glinting in his Apache eyes. Reed and Jingle, crowding the huge shoulder, were reaching for low-hanging butts.

Lacey's yell jarred the stillness. "Booger! Wayne! Look out—"

Up front, where Edman and Booger were riding, a gun slammed heavily. Once, twice. Lacey choked back a harsh curse. He didn't look around. He didn't have time. Rooks' gun was flaring, cutting holes through the dusk. A slug burned across Lacey's left arm, another kicked up dust at his feet.

He crouched, his guns bared and kicking in his hands. Back on that narrow trail Reed jerked. His pained voice broke into cursing. His horse reared wildly, cut across Rooks' mincing animal. Lacey's lead found its mark in that big bulk, sent it toppling with a shrill scream off the trail. Reed's pained swearing snapped off. . . .

Young Wayne jerked his frightened cayuse around, his face shocked, trying to understand the sudden treachery. A round hole appeared in his forehead. He sagged, was thrown off the saddle by his pitching bronc.

Lacey shifted fast. One of Rooks' slugs ripped its red hot shock across the top of his right shoulder as he started to run forward. It spun him around, directly in the

path of young Wayne's lunging mount. The animal's heavy shoulder rammed Lacey, flung him like a rag doll over the trail edge.

The impact nearly knocked him out. He had a dim sensation of sliding, rolling, of red flares lashing down at him. Then his long, tumbling roll ended.

He lay still for some time, his mind blurred. His left arm was doubled under him. Pain stabbed in measured strokes through his side. A warm wind caressed his bruised face. The high blinking stars above him seemed to sneer. . .

Then Block Edman's voice came, breaking the stillness, startlingly clear. "Reed's done for, Rooks. His cayuse fell on him. But I reckon Lacey an' Booger won't bother us. Nor this young fellow. He's got one of yore slugs between his eyes!"

Rooks' voice was thin, rasping. "You think Hunter's gonna swaller the story we'll give him?"

"He'll have to swaller it. Remember I'm still the law. No one kin prove a thing. We were dry-gulched. Lacey was with 'em, pullin' trigger at us from behind. He got Booger an' young Wayne 'fore we knew it was all about. Hell! Who's gonna say no, Rooks?"

- The clack of mincing hoofs drifted to Lacey as things stood out sharper. His right hand moved to his holster, but no butt reassured him. He lay still, knowing death would blast down at him if he made a noise.

Edman's voice came again. "Me an' Jingle are goin' to see Seelong. You make sure about Booger an' Lacey. We don't want a slip-up, like the time you thought you got him, up by Buffalo Creek. Then head back for town. We'll meet you up by the Butte. I'll do the talkin'."

The clack of hoofs moved away. . .

LOOSE stones rattled warningly as Rooks started down the steep slope. Lacey tensed. The pain of his twisted left arm

set his teeth. He hunched up slowly to a low crouch behind the shielding greasewood clump. He had lost both his guns in his fall from the trail. His eyes searched, swiftly—froze on the thin glint of metal ten feet up-slope.

Rooks was coming down twenty feet to the left of where Lacey crouched. His lean figure was doubled at the waist. He moved warily, a gun glinting in his fist. Lacey's mind raced. He had to reach his gun, somehow, before Rooks spotted him. . .

He bent noiselessly, his fingers closing about a fist sized rock. Still bent over he threw it, with short, under-arm motion, down the slope.

The sudden crash and rattle stiffened the black-shirted killer. He paused, his gun lifted, twisted slightly away from Lacey.

Lacey threw again. The rock rolled, sent a loose slide over the steeper drop fifty feet downslope. Rooks whirled. Moonlight sprayed his sharp face, touched the uncertain glitter in his eyes.

Lacey straightened, dove for his gun. The deputy seemed to sense the move. He swung around, cut down with his ready gun. Lead whipped by Lacey's face, kicked up dirt to one side. Then his fingers closed about the familiar butt. He rolled, violently, with Rooks' second shot plucking at his sleeve. He came erect in one fast spin, shifted sidewise as he shot twice.

Rooks jerked, doubled. Moonlight touched his surprised, distorted face. Then he fell forward, moved convulsively. Stilled.

Quiet seeped down over the slope. Up on the ledge, Rooks' waiting cayuse whinnied impatiently. Lacey went back up the slope. He found his other gun on the way. His face was stony as he reloaded both, holstered them. His left arm hung limp at his side.

Something stirred the brush just off the

lip of the trail. Lacey moved to it, looked down on Booger's pain-twisted face. The Circle H man was shot twice in the back.

Lacey squatted beside him. With his right arm he levered the puncher up to his shoulder. Sweat came out over his powerful body with the heart-breaking effort. His left arm seemed to knife him, bring his lips into tight grimace. He got Booger up to the ledge trail, eased him down. He looked around him, then, a frown ridging his brow. Rooks' animal waited, trailing its reins. He whistled sharply for his own animal, knowing that if it had got clear it would be within whistling distance.

Booger stirred, opened pained eyes. He looked up into Lacey's face, and a grim smile touched his lips. "Glad they didn't get you, Lacey. The murderin' polecats. . ." His voice edged into broken cough.

Lacey lifted his gaze to the dark notch where Edman and Jingle had ridden. He said, "That's how they worked it, Booger. There never was any ambush. I reckon that's how Smiley got his." His voice hardened. "Mebbe the kid's with Seelong, sure enough. But I knew he couldn't have been in a thing like this."

Booger's voice became ragged. "They've been playin' the Circle H against the Lazy X, Lacey. I reckon that's plain enough, now. All of it. I wish Hunter knew."

Lacey lifted him again, his face stony against the pain it cost him. He got him astride Rooks' cayuse. "I can't see that you get back to town, Booger," he said tonelessly. "I got a score to settle—a kid to see. . ."

Booger clutched at his shoulder. His eyesight was dimming. "Good luck . . . Lacey!"

He sagged over the horn, watched Lacey turn, get into saddle of the black that had come at his call. The big Lazy X man waved an arm, pivoted the animal. Went pounding up toward the dark notch against the sky.

Booger caught at his fading senses with an iron will. He looked back along the trail and thought of Hunter following a trail that would peter out, as it had petered out for him the last time. His teeth set harshly over the groan that came unwilling to his lips. He could never get back to town. Never get Hunter and the others up here in time to help Lacey. He knew he probably would not get back to town at all. . .

Then his pained mind hit on a slim chance, and he rallied his fading strength into one last effort. He couldn't find Hunter. But Hunter would perhaps find him. He eased out of saddle, staggered drunkenly downslope to where brush made dark clumps. He worked feverishly, feeling his strength oozing out through those ugly holes in his back.

He paused, finally, by the side of the huge pile of dry brush he had collected. His hand quivered as he struck a match, nursed it to the tinder-like twigs.

Then he stumbled back, away from the licking blaze. Up on the ledge trail he sank to his knees. A grim smile etched itself across his hard face as he watched the mounting flames. Somewhere out in the broken country, Hunter might see. . .

Chapter VIII

THE RECKONING

THE COUNTRY beyond the notch was rock-ribbed, broken into innumerable deep-walled gulches, ravines, washouts. It was a savage, desolate land in which a hundred men might vanish without leaving a trace.

Lacey looked down on it with a set face. Somewhere in that star-lit world was the kid he had picked up on the old Emigrant Trail. A wild kid who had always been hard to handle. And there was Seelong, the Border-runner. And Jingle and Block Edman, who had used a star to

cover their killings—to set into play hatred and suspicion that was choking the Coyote country.

Impatience worked in Lacey with gnawing teeth. He and Brent had come into the section together. And somehow he felt responsible for what had happened. For the youngster's going bad. He should have taken Brent with him up The Trail. Should have. . .

His hard jaw ridged, mirroring his mood. There was a lot of things he should have done. Things it was now too late to undo.

He glanced back up the slope, thinking of the long trail to Gunnison. If he went back for Hunter and the others, the chances were a hundred to one they'd ever find Seelong and the kid. He had to go on, alone. . .

The black picked its way down the broken slope. He followed a faint trail into a deep ravine and pushed on through the gloomy cut by guess. The black snorted softly when they reached the end. Here Lacey hesitated, his gaze scanning the sage-stippled flat that glittered whitely under the cold stars.

Far against the northern border of the flat, movement caught his eye, sent him crowding the black into shielding shadows. Leaning forward in the saddle he watched a file of riders come from low hills, cut across a corner of the sandy stretch.

A hard frown lined his brow. "Reckon that's the rest of 'em," he muttered to himself. "Looks like they shook Hunter off, an' are comin' in to join the others!"

His eyes were bleak and calculating as he watched them. They crossed the sandy stretch like grim phantoms, vanished into the black mouth of a narrow canyon that slashed into the opposite cliffs.

Grim thoughts shaped up in Lacey's mind. Five riders. With the four that had come through the notch, and Jingle and Block Edman, it made eleven, all told. Eleven hard-riding, gunfast men who. . .

Lacey let his thoughts hang at this

point. He shifted his gunbelts to easier setting, his lips puckering at the pain in his wrenched and bullet-torn left arm. That arm would be useless in a fight, he knew. But he shrugged slowly, and his face was hard and lined, like that of a man who has come too far along a road and can't go back.

A half hour later he was in the steep-walled canyon, tying the black to a shadowing mesquite tree. Ahead of him, around a bend in the canyon, a red glow, marked a campfire. Lacey left the animal, went in swift prow toward the glare.

Minutes later he was crouched behind a jumble of rocks and debris, close to the western wall. Watching the campfire not a hundred yards from him. . .

There was activity about that blaze. Four lean men were swinging away, guns glinting in the flamelight, spurs jingling. They mounted saddled horses, swung the animals about on the edge of the fire-glow.

A long-jawed, crooked-mouthed man, whose lean waist was crossed by sagging gunbelts, was giving orders. His voice was sharp; the tone of a man accustomed to having orders obeyed.

"Get back to those cows we left behind, an' swing 'em north. You oughta get 'em to the ford at Break River Canyon by tomorrow night. Take 'em through. The rest of us will stay here an' watch how things break."

The lead man nodded wordlessly. Lacey watched them go, vanish downcanyon. Then his gaze swung back to the men remaining. Three of them, dusty and hard-faced, were hunkered by the fire, watching the bubbling coffee pot. Evidently they were part of the five who had just ridden into camp.

In the half-shadows behind them, a slim-hipped figure paced restlessly. Nearer the shifting flames, Jingle and the sheriff were facing the long-jawed rustler chief. The sheriff moved heavy shoulders when Seelong turned his attention to them.

"Reckon me an' Jingle'll be headin' back," he said. "By time Hunter gets through swearin' at the trail he's lost an' starts back I'll be in Gunnison with a story. An' the way I'll tell it it'll blow the works sky high. If Coyote county doesn't see a range war after this I'll eat this tin badge!"

The pacing figure turned, came in toward the fire. He stopped, faced the sheriff. And Lacey, watching from the darkness, stiffened, though he had expected this. . .

For the slim youngster was Brent Taylor. Harder than he remembered him, his lips thinner, his mouth more reckless and cynical. And the way he looked at the blocky lawman showed plainly the hate he held for this man, and the cold contempt which underlined it.

"I don't like it, Block!" he snapped coldly. He looked across to Seelong, a long stride from the fire, and a hard, questioning flare came into his eyes. "I came into this outfit with my eyes open, Seelong. I knew what I was doin', an' I ain't kickin' there. But there's somethin' I don't understand—somethin' more than just rustlin' Circle H beef goin' on. I can't figger this splittin' up angle every time we pull a raid—all this fine-haired business Block's been pullin'. What's behind it?"

Edman's heavy features darkened. A strange, taut chill seeped down over the fire. Slowly Seelong turned, his shoulders sagging queerly, a yellow flare crowding his tawny eyes. The three men by the fire went cold, sensing the sudden break here—sensing the showdown that had been in the cards since the day Brent had joined them.

And inside Lacey grew a cold understanding. They had used Brent as a blind to work up feeling against the Lazy H. The split trails angle, the sudden treachery of Rooks and Jingle and Block Edman, the story the heavy-shouldered lawman circulated in Gunnison about young Brent—

all this had been part of a plan to stir into bloody action a range war that would leave the Coyote ranges wide open for Seelong's raiders.

This realization came to Lacey. And, as he straightened slowly, his fingers brushing his low hanging right gunbutt, a thin smile came to wipe the dark torment from his soul. Young Brent had been wild—but not bad. He was proving it now, as he faced Seelong and his scowling riders across the fire.

IN THE shadows beyond the flame-glow, horses cropped at spiky vegetation. The sound of their feeding, their restless stamping, made a thin, discordant note in the taut stillness that seeped down on the scene.

Through it Edman's voice came, heavy-lined and sneering. "Since when have *you* taken over the job of askin' questions, Kid?"

Brent shifted slowly. His gaze ranged over the scowling Seelong, over the three men who had straightened, were now drawing silently to positions flanking the outlaw chief. To Jingle, somewhat to one side of the taut, blocky sheriff—waiting!

And in that moment young Brent saw where his wild trail had led him. But his eyes were dark and contemptuous as he faced the blocky lawman, and his voice was bleak and unafraid.

"Ever since I learned you were in the setup, Block!" he rasped coldly. "Since the day I found out you killed Sheriff Tim Bailey, so's to have a free hand in town. I didn't like it then, an' I don't like it now. I told you that before, but you didn't have the guts to make yore play. Well, I'm tellin' you again, Block! I don't go for back-shooters, even when they hide behind a tin badge!"

Edman's thick shoulders jerked as if a lash had bitten into him. A thin streak of silence hung between them, and then Edman's shoulders slouched. His voice was

thick and snarling. "Well! I'm facin' you—"

He drove his right hand down for his gun before he finished his snarled challenge, his face distorted in the red glare of the leaping flames.

A single shot lashed the stillness. Edman straightened. His eyes snapped wide and round on the thin wreath of smoke at Brent's hip. A short sound bubbled on his thick lips. Then he collapsed, fell forward at the feet of the youngster who had killed him.

For a long, taut moment after Block fell, a hushed stillness gripped the campfire. Brent faced Seelong and the four men siding the long-jawed Border-runner, his lean body slouched, his gun held lax at his hip. And the wildness of this kid held them momentarily, cold and uncertain, staring down at the sprawled sheriff whose guns had been among the fastest in the section—but who had not been fast enough to beat this kid.

Slowly, then, Brent started to back away from the fire. His mouth was hard and twisted, but his voice was level. "I'm foggin' out, Seelong. This thing between Block an' me was personal. He had his chance—you all saw it. I'm pullin' out of this the way I came in—of my own free will."

His gaze steadied on the rigid outlaw chief, and the question on his lips thinned. "Shall it be peaceful, Seelong. Or—"

Behind him, breaking in on that taut scene, a voice drawled, "We're both pullin' out, Kid. Together!"

BRENT jerked. His eyes slanted to the big-shouldered figure looming up beside him. He said, "Vic!" in a harsh, surprised whisper. "Vic Lacey—"

And in that moment Seelong moved with the flashing, deadly speed that had made his name a grim byword along the Border trails.

Brent twisted, his eyes catching the beginning of the long-jawed outlaw's motion. His lithe shoulder slammed Lacey out of the way in the split second Seelong's guns thundered.

Lacey heard the ugly splat of lead hit Brent as he whirled, cut down with his gun. A sickening feeling tore at his stomach—a feeling that was not eased as his slugs slammed into the twisting outlaw chief, spun him back to fall almost loosely across the fire.

That much he saw clearly. The rest of it became an unreal world of hard, twisted faces by the fire, of jagged spurts of flame, the biting odor of acrid smoke. Then, the momentary glimpse of Brent, still erect, balanced on wide-spread feet.

And then it was gone, and Lacey was conscious of his firing pin clicking futilely on spent cartridges. He was still erect, bent forward at the waist, and he reached swift fingers for his left holster.

"I Talked with God"

(Yes, I Did—Actually and Literally)

and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 4½ years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was. Now—I have credit at more than one bank, I own a beautiful home, drive a lovely car, own a newspaper and a large office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the

invisible God-Law, under any and all circumstances.

You, too, may find and use the same staggering Power of the God-Law that I use. It can bring to you, too, whatever things are right and proper for you to have. Do you believe this? It won't cost much to find out—just a penny post-card or a letter, addressed to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 138, Moscow, Idaho, will bring you the story of the most fascinating success of the century. And the same Power I use is here for your use, too. I'll be glad to tell you about it. All information about this experience will be sent you free, of course. The address again—Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 138, Moscow, Idaho. Advt. Copyright 1939 Frank B. Robinson.

He saw Jingle shift his gun to him in that instant, and the thought came to Lacey, then, sharp and final, that this was the end of it. He kept moving, with that thought in him, spinning his body backward in grim attempt to evade Jingle's lead.

Beside him, some ten paces away, a Colt roared viciously. Jingle straightened as if he had been kicked in the stomach, and then reeled to the ground.

Five feet from him the last erect member of that outlaw gun crew cut down on Lacey with a defiant snarl. He slammed two slugs into Lacey's right leg before the big Lazy X man's return fire slapped him back and down to an inert sprawl.

Lacey went down with him. He fell with his left arm under him, and the pain that wrenched at him brought a momentary nausea whirling into his head.

For a long eternity the fading echoes lived over that shambles. In the midst of it Lacey pushed himself up. About the dying fire men sprawled, unmoving. Lacey's blurred gaze, shifting to find Brent, was caught by movement on the very edge of the blaze.

A lean, crooked-mouthed figure was heaving to one knee. A terrible figure whose clothes were smouldering, whose left cheek was seared and blackened.

Some terrible will seemed to actuate Seelong, lift him from hell for a moment's final reckoning. His right hand came up with a heavy, glinting Colt—lined its grim muzzle on Lacey.

He never fired it.

From the darkness, twenty feet to one side of Lacey, a red flare streaked. Seelong shuddered, swayed—sprawled back into the licking flames. . .

Silence crept back to that terrible scene. A wind rustled through the brush, bending the partially banked out fire tongues. Then Brent's voice broke the stillness, hard and concerned. "Vic! You still all together?"

Lacey grinned. He turned painfully,

hitched himself to sitting position against a rock. He said, "I'm a hard man to kill, Kid!" And waited while young Brent came toward him, his right arm limp and dangling and bloody.

He stood over Lacey, swaying a little, his thin lips edged into bitter smile. "I'm sorry, Vic, we had to meet again—like this! In Seelong's camp. . ." His knees buckled and he went down in a crumpled heap at Lacey's side.

* * *

Frank Hunter and the posse found them like that. They had been drawn to the fire Booger had lighted, and there found the Circle H puncher who lived long enough to tell his story. They pushed on through the notch, and in the dark ravine below the broken slope they had run into four of Seelong's riders, back-trailing to the herd they had left in a box canyon. Two of them had been killed, a third grievously wounded. The fourth, to save his neck, led them to Seelong's camp.

They pulled up on the edge of that dying fire, and what they saw stilled them, held them with a grim awe.

Then Hunter dismounted, paced to the propped up Lacey and the unconscious youngster. For a moment the old cowman stood over them, silent, his face drawn.

Lacey said, "He'll live, Hunter—if we get him to a doc before he bleeds to death. . ."

Hunter bent over Brent, a hard regret thinning in his eyes. "I reckon, Lacey, it was my fault. I've got a lot of apologizin' to do, after this—to you, to old Sandy . . . an' to Brent. I pushed the kid into this, because I was too bullheaded to even think of my daughter's happiness. I was wrong, Lacey— And when Brent gits well I'm gonna make it up to him."

He did.

The wedding was held at the Circle H, three months later, and Vic Lacey, smiling and happy, was Brent's best man.

THE END

BUCKSKIN BANDIT-BUSTER

By RALPH YERGEN

WHEN Louie the Spud saw the village preacher coming down the street with a buckskin horse in tow, he began to curse. The sight of the lanky, black-clad parson leading the sleepy buckskin was hardly one to provoke profanity. But the husky little blacksmith, called Louie the Spud because of his potato-shaped torso, was recalling previ-

ous experiences with Preacher Vick's horse, all of them unpleasant.

At the blacksmith shop door, Preacher Vick paused and turned melancholy eyes upon Louie's sweat-streaked face. "Alas, my dear Louie," he said, "Solomon is in need of shoes again so soon. I am tempted to believe your work is not of the best."

Louie grunted. "If you'd let me whale

Louie's blood chilled as he looked into the wicked little eyes of the notorious killer.



*Blacksmith Louie
damned Preacher
Vic's unshoeable buck-
skin pony to hell—until a
wanted killer taught him that
a horse's hoof outweighs a .45
slug and a man's life savings!*

the daylights out of the ornery critter just once, he'd mebbby behave so a man could. . ."

Preacher Vick raised a hand and his eyes lifted toward the sky. "Violence. Violence! It is all you men of the frontier know. Gentleness, humbleness, humility—those are the virtues to strive for!"

Louie looked skeptical. "Mebby you never shod any hosses, Preacher."

"In handling beasts, it is as in all else, my good smith. Let me warn you. If I find a single whip mark on Solomon, I shall never enter your door again. And I shall advise all members of my flock to patronize the blacksmith at Lizard Gulch."

"Shucks. You ought to at least let me hog-tie and throw this hunk of buckskin dynamite."

"No!" thundered the preacher. "At heart, Solomon is a meek and gentle animal. What you mistake for wickedness is nothing but the spirit of play. Solomon is so like a little child. Is there not an ounce of forgiveness in your hardened soul?"

Louie shrugged. "You win, Preacher. But don't blame me if Solomon throws his shoes too soon."

When Vick was gone, Louie led Solomon inside to the rail. He snubbed his halter rope short.

His head drooped, Solomon stood laxly, appearing to be half asleep. He looked as harmless as a lamb, as if nothing could ever bother him.

"I'll give the preacher's method a fair trial," Louie decided.

Gingerly, the hammered-down smithy picked up a front hoof. Nothing happened. He pulled it between his knees and held it there, gouging the caked debris from the frog with his trimming blade. Solomon didn't move a muscle. Louie's grim wariness lessened. Maybe—in the language of Preacher Vick—Solomon had cast aside his playful mischief.

Louie's illusion was short. The buckskin suddenly rolled, throwing its weight on

the blacksmith's bent shoulders. Louie dropped the hoof and dived. He slid along the floor, rolled over like a barrel and sprang to his feet.

With diabolical cleverness, Solomon had righted himself and was slouched forward as before, his deceptive eyes half closed.

LOUIE THE SPUD swallowed the expletives building on his tongue. Solomon hadn't changed a whit. Solomon was the most exasperatingly treacherous horse it had ever been his misfortune to tangle with, Louie was thinking. He sliced off a liberal chunk of cold-pressed plug and rolled it around in his cheek, savoring its flavor.

"Easy, boy," he murmured. "Louie's not going to hurt you none. Louie's your friend. Show him your foot, boy."

He hoisted the hoof again. His powerful back muscles rippled as he bent over to clench it between his stocky knees. Minutes passed. Gradually Louie relaxed his vigilance as he worked. With jarring abruptness, the foot tugged sharply forward, rocking him off balance.

Solomon's leg reversed motion. It drove backward like a stroking piston. Like a round ball, Louie went spinning, end over end, across the shop floor to crash into a pile of scrap iron.

Echoes of Preacher Vick's words whispered in his ear as he walked slowly back and patted the lax buckskin. He spoke soothingly. "Have your fun, Solomon, old hoss. You won't do it again, will you, boy?"

He was almost through trimming the forehoofs when he shifted cramped muscles. Solomon wasn't slow to seize his chance. He twisted a hoof loose with the speed of a lightning bolt. As Louie leaped, a hoof whistled past, a scant inch from his ear. Louie the Spud pulled in a long breath. His lips tightened and his face grew red as a beet.

As his mounting wrath swept away the

preacher's advice, his blistering threats made the air smoke.

"Blast your scaly hide! Try that again and I'll cut your bloody heart out and feed it to the buzzards, you mangy old goat. I'd as soon shoe the Devil in hell. If you was my crowbait, I'd pick your yaller hide clean with a bullwhip. I'd . . ." Louie the Spud continued to exercise his colorful vocabulary.

Solomon's ears flattened and his jaws chomped noisily, as if he understood most of the words and resented them.

Louie went to work, and as his profanity subsided, Solomon again became the picture of meekness. Louie was fitting a shoe when a cold voice made his spine tingle.

"Go easy, hombre! This smoker is loaded!"

He turned and stared into a yawning .45 mouth, six feet from the end of his blunt nose. His eyes traveled over the black barrel to the man who had sneaked silently into his shop.

He was a scrawny fellow, with narrow shoulders, pipe-stem neck and a yellow silk shirt, four sizes too large. His nose was a long, sharp beak, spearing out from between reddish, rat-like eyes. Louie had seen that face on reward posters in the sheriff's office.

"Yeah, I'm Bushwhack Bitney," the gunman snarled in a nasal voice, as he spotted recognition in the blacksmith's eyes. "If you figger on hangin' onto your health, you'll fork over all the dinero you got—and be damn quick about it!" Bitney's eyes were nasty.

Louie released Solomon's hoof, side-stepped quickly.

At the sudden movement, the bandit's eyes snapped and the hammer clicked under his thumb.

"No funny stuff," he growled. "I'd as soon blow your brains out as not. I got plenty of law houns on my heels, anyhow. Come on, dish out that jack."

LOUIE'S blood chilled as he looked into the wicked little eyes of the notorious killer. Blood lust lurked in their crimson depths. Louie suspected that only the commotion that a shot might arouse kept Bitney from shooting first, and robbing afterward. He shook out his pockets.

"Reckon you caught me short, stranger," he said glibly. "Business is bum today."

Bitney spat on the floor. His sharp nose twitched. Gliding forward like a shadow, he buried his cold gun-muzzle in Louie's neck. With his other hand he frisked the blacksmith with expert fingers. Empty-handed, he stepped back, wrapping the .45 in the slack of his shirt. Boots thumped the sidewalk outside.

"Get to workin' on that nag," he snarled. "If anybody comes in, don't let on nothin' or you'll get a slug in the gizzard."

A man passed, but didn't look in. The sound of his steps dwindled away.

Keeping a bilious eye on Louie, the gunhawk slithered to the crude desk in the corner. He opened a cigar box and shook the small change into his pocket.

"Chicken feed," he muttered contemptuously.

Suddenly he whirled threateningly on Louie. "You got some jack stored away somewhere, damn you. There ain't no bank in this one-horse burg. All you hicks got plenty salted where you can watch it. Come across or I'll nip your ears off."

"You're a day too late," the blacksmith lied smoothly. "I lost my roll last night in a blackjack game. That slick-fingered tinhorn palmed—"

"You're lyin'!" Bitney snapped. "Get to work."

Louie fanned up the forge. He pushed a shoe into the glowing coals. Covertly he watched the bandit paw through the desk and through the repairs compartments. A rider jogged past the door. At a jerk of Bitney's gun, Louie picked up his giant clippers and started to shear the sharp edge from Solomon's rear hoofs.

The buckskin was behaving himself perfectly. But Louie didn't think about that. He was watching Bushwhack Bitney, at the same time trying to keep his inner tenseness out of his face. Every cent he owned was hidden in the shop. Would the greedy bandit find it?

He saw Bitney's fingers prowl to the big pendulum clock on the wall, rip open the roomy compartment that housed the swinging weight. Bitney yelped and dragged out a small, black bag that hung heavily from his fist.

Louie swallowed hard, the tobacco in his cheek suddenly tasting bitter. He wondered if Bitney had developed a sixth sense that aided him in smelling out money. Of course it wasn't a very clever place of concealment. For a long time, Louie had been intending to bury his money under the floor; but he kept putting it off. Now it was too late. Bitney was pawing through it, the gloating expression on his weasel face turning sour.

"Hell," he grumbled. "Only about five hundred bones. Not enough to last me a week, once I hit the hot spots."

LOUIE choked back the curse that leaped to his throat. Something always turned up to wipe away what little he could scrape together. That five hundred was all he had to show for twenty years of the hardest kind of toil. He'd planned on using that money to build himself a cabin, where the ponderous pines reached into the sky, a place where he could hunt and fish and enjoy life when he grew too old to shoe horses any more. It was tough to watch this rat-faced gun hoodlum ride away to spill that money among the honkytonks of Reno or Virginia City.

Louie wracked his brain for a plan to stop him. If he only had a gun. But he didn't even own a gun. His only weapons were two brawny fists. What good were they against Bitney's .45?

Bitney was backing out of the shop now,

a sour grin twisting his slash mouth. Louie wrenched his gaze back to the flinty hoof between his knees. He forced a hollow chuckle between taut, dry lips; then quickly smothered it.

He affected fright and surprise when he saw Bushwhack Bitney dart back inside the shop.

"I heard you!" Bitney was snarling. "I heard you snickerin'. I thought you had more dinero planted around here. Spill it now, or I'll plug you, sure as hellfire burns west of Boothill."

Louie paled. He gulped, shifted his gaze guiltily. "I—I wasn't laughin'. I choked on my chew. I ain't got any more money—no place."

"Don't feed me that tripe. An old skate like you ought to have two or three grand salted. You snickered because you thought you was gettin' off easy. I'm too foxy to swaller your lies."

"I ain't got a cent more, I tell you," Louie protested desperately.

He wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hairy arm.

Still leveling the gun, Bushwhack Bitney reached out with his free hand and plucked an iron rod from the forge. The tip end glowed orange. Louie could see the shimmer of heat rising from it as it snaked slowly toward him.

He stood rooted to the floor, bent over, holding Solomon's foot, as if frozen there by fright.

"Come clean, you old gander," Bitney said in an ugly voice. "Mebby the smell of your own meat scorchin' will make you talk. This rod is just the right size to poke your eyes out. I'll—"

"Wait," Louie gasped. He was trembling violently. His eyes goggled out, and his words were husky croaks. "I'll tell—if you'll go away and let me alone."

Greedy lights glittered in Bitney's eyes. He lowered the red-tipped iron. "It's a deal."

Louie raised a shaking finger, pointed to

a split board, about four feet behind the horse. "There. Under the floor."

BUSHWHACK BITNEY hurled the iron into the corner. He circled, knelt at the spot that Louie indicated. Without taking his eye off the blacksmith, he picked up a chisel and pried up the split board.

At the instant the bandit's gaze dropped earthward, Louie the Spud acted. He released his knee grip on Solomon's ankle. In the same motion, he swung his elbow in a sharp jab, squarely to the most ticklish portion of Solomon's anatomy.

As the outraged bronc's powerful muscles flexed, Louie rolled sideways.

Solomon lunged backward, snapping his halter-rope taut. His released hoof zoomed through the air. It thwacked on human skullbone with a sharp crack.

The venom faded from Bushwhack Bitney's eyes. Bewilderment froze his face as he spun over the floor, arms and legs flopping grotesquely.

The momentum of his own leap, plus the drive of Solomon's leg, hurled Louie against a grindstone. He wobbled to his feet, clutching an oak singletree. He dropped it when he saw the limp form of

Bushwhack Bitney draped over a big pot of axle grease. One side of the bandit's head was a red blotch.

A satisfied smile creased Louie's broad face as he bound the senseless gunman and retrieved his money sack.

He went over to where Solomon dozed peacefully. With a work-roughened hand, he caressed the buckskin's silky shoulder. There was nothing forced about his chuckle now.

"You come through like a thoroughbred, Solomon, old hoss. Reckon your heart is in the right place after all. Preacher Vick was right. I'll never cuss you again."

He lifted a hoof and slapped a cooled shoe against it. Without warning, Solomon side-stepped, his off-hoof smashing down on Louie's little toe. The shoe went spinning to the floor. Howling with pain, Louie the Spud yanked his toe free and danced around on one foot.

"Consarn your filthy black heart to blazes! Why—" He choked for want of breath. When he could bellow again, his verbal explosions made the air crackle.

Preacher Vick would have shuddered. But Preacher Vick never took it upon himself to shoe his beloved Solomon.

Jerkliners' War!



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Mike floored him with a blow.

IRON MAN OF THE KEELBOAT RUN

The toughest, roughest damned keelboat captain on the old Mississippi was Mike Fink—and no man who wished to live, whether friend or foe, ever questioned his boast within Mike's range of hearing!

By M. DAVIS

“**N**OPE, Carpenter, I don’t want yer gettin’ it into yer head I’m soft er somethin’. Warn’t I the crack spy of 1812? Them was the days. Nothin’ like a good roarin’ battle ter start the day off right. Nope, Carpy, if they’s ary a word outen’ yer—”

“Aw, Mike, fergit it. Yuh know they ain’t nobody goin’ ter take it onto hisself ter say Mike Fink’s gittin’ soft. That keelboat of yourn is the best on the river—”

“Shore, it’s the best on the river! Think I’d have it—aw, hell! Carpy, it ain’t such a easy life, ridin’ the river, noways. An’ they’s another thing—when I git ter the p’int where I have ter have two or three more boats stringin’ along behind me ter keep them damned redskins outen my boat, I’ll take out. Are yer with me, er ain’t yer?”

“Hell’s bells, now, ain’t that a question, when I been beggin’ yer fer three days ter let me ship in with yer! When do we start?”

Mike Fink smoothed a minute spot on the side of his boat with a pumice stone, and kept chewing his wad. Then, deliberately, he squinted his left eye, puckered the right side of his mouth, and spat. A big red ant that had been crawling up the trunk of a tree ten feet from him, fell to the ground. Arms akimbo, Mike leaned back and surveyed his craft.

His pal, Carpenter, broke in on his thoughts. “Wot yer goin’ ter name her, pard?”

“Damnation, man, kain’t yer read? She’s the *Lightfoot*, an’ she’ll go six mile an’ hour down the river if she’ll go a inch! ‘Course, I ain’t sayin’ how fast she’ll go up it. That’s up ter yer an’ me an’ the boys. Ain’t she a beaut? The load of skunk hides I’m takin’ down on ’er ain’t ter be sneezed at, either. Catch them river pirates closin’ in on me, I’ll ram right through ’em. Me that’s rowed a boat from the time I could walk, an’ the best

rifle shot in the hull Mississippi Valley. We’re takin’ a thousand bushels of wheat down fer ol’ Tod Graham, too, an’ six loads of furs fer Guts Wilson. Jee-ru-salem, ain’t she a beaut!”

As indeed she was. Large and symmetrical, with a cabin set apart for passengers, as well as quarters for the freight and stock, she was easily the queen of the keelboats. Four large oars at the bow furnished the propelling power, while one massive oar, thirty feet long and equipped with a blade like the fin of a fish, was used to steer her.

When the wind was right, a large sail was used. But, more often than not, the weary crew walked over the rough shore rocks and pulled the boat along by a heavy rope. Sometimes an overhanging rock, or tree, ahead, served as an anchor for the rope, and from the deck the crew pulled hand over hand.

“When yer goin’ ter let me start, Fink?”

“Hold thet blasted tongue. My name’s Mike. Once, down on the delta, I shot a man fer bein’ so proper. We’re shippin’ this comin’ Monday, come daylight. Pack yer britches an’ whiskey.”

“I wear ’em both, one outside an’ one inside,” cackled Carpenter, and Mike roared with laughter.

MONDAY dawned sultry and still, with scarcely any flow to the river. All day long the crew, naked to the waist, at turns rowed or kept a sharp lookout for snipers along the shore.

As they passed along near a jutting bank, Mike yelled, “Hyar, piggy, piggy!” and sighted his old rifle. It popped loud, four times, with a kick that would have knocked down a lesser man.

“Hoot, mon, look! Ye’ve shot the tails from them four piggies rootin’ on the shore!”

Mike wheeled on his heel, and the crew bent to their oars. At the next wharf he showed up on deck again.

"Men," he announced, "yer're goin' ter see somethin' yer never seen afore. See that blasted lad settin' there on the wharf, with his foot propped up? Well—hyar goes!"

The colored boy fell to the wharf with a yell. An instant later a shrill whistle sounded from the shore.

"Listen, Mike! They're callin' yer in ter shore! Now we're in fer a fight!"

"Gittin' white-livered already, Carpenter? Heave to, fellers, in ter the wharf!"

As they made fast to the dock, a few minutes later, a six-foot giant waddled up to look them over.

"Gittin' kinda outen your territory, ain't yuh—shootin' boys in the heel?"

"Man, don't yer know a good deed when yer see one did? Didn't yer see the shape his foot was in? Any lad with a heel like that kain't chop cotton, much less snap it, worth a hoot. I've jest fixed him up so he kin wear a genteel boot."

His crew tittered.

The giant showed his star. "I reckon yuh better come along—we calls that occasion for a trial in this part of the country."

"Shore, ain't seen no trial fer quite a spell." Mike swaggered after him.

But in exactly thirty-three minutes, the whole crew followed Mike back on board the keelboat—Mike still swaggering, with only a scratch on his nose and one front tooth hanging loose to remind him of the foray. Carpenter had a piece out of his left ear and the other crew members had knives less sharp than before—but the little river town held the silence of death. The only sound was the lapping of the oars in the water as the big flatboat left the wharf.

During the rest of the day, things were so quiet that Mike Fink and his crony, Carpenter, entertained the crew by shooting tin cups full of whiskey from each other's heads.

As the sun drifted down behind the cypress trees, a lone watch was left on deck,

and the cook yelled, "Come an' git ut!"

A general stampeding and scraping of chairs followed.

Mike bowed his head.

"Up ter my lips an' through my gums,
Look out, oh stomach, hyar she comes!"

The men guffawed and began shoveling the hominy and pork into cavernous mouths. There was no time for talk. Only loud chewing and the scraping of plates was heard. At last, when all the platters were empty, Mike walked over to a corner and brought out a gallon jug of whiskey. Standing, so he could hold the limit, he took a long draw at the jug, gulping down seven times without a single breath. He set the jug carefully on the table and went on deck. There was no need for words. Each man took his turn at the jug, and the seventh and last drained the last drop.

OUT on deck again, Carpenter pulled out his mouth organ and began the music of the hoedown.

"Whee-ee-ee!" One Eye Harry jumped up for his famous bantam jig.

Mike went in for another jug. The hoedown became faster and faster. All hands swung into the dance. Carpenter strutted back and forth as he played. Ribald jokes and laughter rang out. Then Mike came back, reeling drunk.

"All handsh stop! It's like a bunch ol' women—dancin'—playin'. Letsh have a drinkin' contes'! She who kin hol' mosh whiskey!"

A shout went up from the crew and Mike raised his hands importantly.

"Here'sh seven jugs. Ever' man fer hisself an' devil take the hindmos'! Las' one through's lil' baby!"

Seven jugs went into the air. After several strong pulls, five of the jugs came down. Iron-stomached though they were, the men couldn't take it. Only Mike's and

Carpenter's jugs remained up. Then Mike dropped his, drunkenly, and it spilled all over the deck. Carpenter brought his down with a bang.

"Yah—they ain't nary a man hyar but me. Watsh eatin' yer, Mike—river life makin' yer soft?"

Mike floored him with a blow. A general melee followed—seven men rolling, pushing, cursing, on the deck. Mike fell over a half-empty jug. Holding it crookedly aloft, he drained the contents.

"Carpy—where'sh yer? I—I been a bad, bad boy. Carpy, come hyar ter Mike! Never again I fight my ol' frien'! Bes' frien' I got in worl'!" Tears streamed down his cheeks as he thought of it. "C'mon, Carpy—hyar—hyarsh tin cup. Two tin cupsh. Let'sh play ol' game."

Carpenter went along, tipsily, and allowed Mike to set the tin cup of whiskey on his head. Both were bleary-eyed.

"Now." Mike balanced a cup on his own head and patted Carpenter on the shoulder. "Who shoots firs'?"

Carpenter was too drunk to talk. Mike gave him another pat and paced off ten steps—turned, and without aiming, fired wildly. His bullet hit Carpenter between the eyes.

Mike blew his nose. "Carpy, ol' man, stan' up—give me time ter aim. Blood—hell! Carpy—CARPY! What'd yer let me shoot yer fer? Carpy! Now we kain't shoot no more cups. Men, don't yer see

what I've done? It's Carpy! He'sh dead!"

The drunken crew gathered around in a circle, with bowed heads.

"Bes' damn hoedowner in country."

"Ol' Carpy's eyes musta been bad, er he'd a dodged!"

Mike wailed dismally and took to another jug, as the cook brought out a sheet and wrapped it around Carpenter.

The cook wiped his eyes. "Bes' frien' I ever had. He allus liked me biscuits!"

During the rest of the trip down, and the return, the men were a sober lot, and never was there more skilful piloting of the river. But exactly one month from the day, on the next trip down, there came an evening when the hoedown did not lull the crew to sleep. Something in the air incited them to another drunken spree, and after a round of wrestling that ended in fist fights. Mike's jug made him talk.

"Wanta know lil' shecret? Ol' Mike had ever'body fooled—fooled ol' Carpy, too—thought I wash playin'. I knowed right whar I wash aimin' all time—right 'tween eyes. Callin' me soft! But I showed 'im. . . Ugh—" And Mike fell to the deck, blood spurting from a hole between his own eyes.

Even as the words came out of Mike's mouth, the cook, whose biscuits Carpenter had always praised, shot him. Thus, through a drunken boast, was ended the life of one of the most noted and desperate keelboatmen.



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DAMN THE VIGILANTE

Thrilling Boom-Camp Novelette

Chapter I

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GALLOWS! By NORMAN A. FOX

a ridge for a last look at the gold camp where violence had spawned and spread. Yet Rory Kincaid looked backward without regret, for a blizzard is kinder than the hang-noose.

He was the last of that highly-organized road agent band which had terrorized the camps until vigilantes, matching ruthlessness with ruthlessness, had risen to stamp them out. From where he sat his saddle, Rory Kincaid could see Hangman's Gulch, where Henry Plummer had drawn aces and eights. The rest of the road agents had been captured in the ensuing month.

All but Rory Kincaid. He was the last. . . .

An unpleasant, self-satisfied laugh rolled from the depths of his massive body. He despised the fools who had hoped to trap him. He was as guilty as the other members of the outlaw band. He'd robbed and spent his gold in rollicking nights at Blacky Corbus' Hurdy-Gurdy House. Rory Kincaid—cock-of-the-walk! He'd kissed the honkytonk girls and slapped Blacky Corbus' swarthy face, just for the hell of it. He'd had his day in Bannack, and now he was turning his back on it.

He'd get through to Fort Benton, he as-



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sured himself. He'd succeed where lesser men would fail. And somewhere in yonder trackless wilderness was a gold cache, road agent loot only he could claim. Next spring he'd board a boat at Benton, return to the States. He'd be a man of means and importance, back there.

The thought was pleasant and he would have liked to linger and dwell upon it. But snow, swirling out of the north, reminded him of the menace that might suddenly scream down out of the skies. He nudged his horse and, turning, saw a rider coming up the trail from Bannack.

Instinctively Kincaid's hand brushed the gun that was belted outside his heavy mackinaw. Instinctively he tensed with the quick alertness of the hunted. Then he recognized that stooped horseman, and cursed his own skittishness.

Dwight Cruncher, bookkeeper in a Bannack mercantile store, was a little, dried-up wisp of a harmless, middle-aged man. And Rory Kincaid had jumped at sight of him! Kincaid's heavy-featured face darkened with annoyance, but curiosity and avarice gripped him. Why was Dwight Cruncher on the trail? Was he packing gold dust to the Virginia City branch of his employer's store?

That didn't make sense. Dwight Cruncher, Kincaid knew, could never make Virginia City in this weather. Still, Cruncher might be carrying dust, and suddenly Kincaid knew he was going to get that dust.

It wasn't that he wanted the gold. There was plenty of yellow stuff in the road agent cache. But Rory Kincaid had to re-inflate his ego, the self-esteem that had suffered when he'd started at sight of a puny bookkeeper. Grinning mirthlessly, he hid himself in a snow-cloaked clump of bushes.

Let the Vigilantes boast they had freed Montana from the road agent menace. Let them brag of the men they'd captured and hanged. But let them remember that big, blustering Rory Kincaid had eluded them,

that his last gesture had been one of defiance and contempt. Rory Kincaid was going to rob a man within gunshot of Bannack!

HUNKERED in the bushes, Kincaid laid no plans. He didn't need to. He'd ridden with Plummer's band too long for that. And because his mind was free, it swiveled, as he waited, to things he'd long since forgotten.

If he'd been a sentimental man, he might have been nostalgic. But his nature had been hardened by years in this wilderness. Yet, with a gun in his hand and violence in his heart, he thought of the Ohio countryside of his boyhood, the sweet scent of a summer night—and Amelia King. . . .

It surprised him to find the girl in his thoughts again. Why remember distant, unattainable lips when the painted mouth of a honkytonk girl might be pressed to his? Why dwell upon caresses he'd never had when other love was no less warm because it was bought with blood-stained gold?

A friend of Kincaid's had continued to write to him from the old home town through the years. The letters had frequently mentioned Amelia. Still unmarried, Amelia was the town belle. Kincaid knew she had plenty of suitors. Weak, white-faced boys, probably, Rory Kincaid reflected with a sneer.

He dismissed his memories, for Dwight Cruncher was abreast of him, riding slowly, eyes vacant. Kincaid let him pass, let him gain a hundred-yard lead. Then he galloped after the bookkeeper, plowed past him, faced about with leveled gun.

"Throw up your hands!" he ordered. "And fork over any dust you're packin'!"

Dwight Cruncher lifted colorless eyes and slowly raised his hands. His seamed face twisted with surprise and anger and something else—a bitter desperation.

"I've got no dust," he quavered.

Rory Kincaid frowned. "You're wastin' my time!"

With a hopeless shrug, Dwight Cruncher dipped a hand beneath his mackinaw. Rory Kincaid watched him impatiently, yet with faint amusement. This was like robbing a child! Then Kincaid, warned by something in the bookkeeper's eyes, was twisting aside. A gun had materialized in Cruncher's fist and a bullet whipped past Kincaid's head.

Instantly Kincaid's gun spoke. Cruncher's weapon arced into the snow, while the bookkeeper clutched at a bloody hand. Kincaid eyed him narrowly and knew the slight stirring of respect. Yet he grinned.

"Didn't figger you had it in you, Cruncher. Now hand over that dust."

Silently Cruncher probed into his mackinaw pocket with his unwounded hand, tossed a small poke to Kincaid. The big man caught it, hefted it.

"Not a helluva lot," he muttered. "Now head back to Bannack. Tell Colonel Sanders and his vigilantes what happened. Tell 'em there's one road agent they ain't catchin'—Rory Kincaid!"

"Damn you, Kincaid!" Cruncher exploded. "And damn all your kill-crazy kind. Montana's well rid of you and your selfish, ruthless ilk. You don't know what you'll be doing when you ride off with that miserable bit of dust. You don't care that you're dooming the only chance 'of— But what's the use? You couldn't understand, and it wouldn't change things if you did understand. But there'll be a pay-off somewhere! Maybe the vigilantes won't get you, but you'll suffer for this just the same!"

Rory Kincaid arched his heavy brows in astonishment. "You've got more guts than I figgered," he conceded. "But I don't like your tone. What are you? Some sort of sky-pilot?"

"I'm no sky-pilot," Cruncher said wrathfully. "I'm not telling you that God will strike you down for what you've done

—much as you deserve it. I'm just a bookkeeper, Kincaid, but I've learned things from my ledgers. I know when something is put down on the debit side, something must go down on the credit side. In the end, it all balances up. It's the same with people. You're grinning now. You figure you've just won a hand. But there'll be an entry in the books to balance this one. You mark my words!"

Rory Kincaid's anger was rising. He didn't like being threatened and he didn't like being warned. He had no words to match Cruncher's so he moved forward, his gun-arm raised to send the barrel arcing downward across Dwight Cruncher's skull. Cruncher faced him, his colorless eyes aflame with an almost fanatical light. And Rory Kincaid paused, then wordlessly swung his horse and floundered down the trail.

He rode recklessly; angry with himself, angry at the nameless thing that had stayed his arm. And the echo of Dwight Cruncher's threat seemed to cling in the icy air. Kincaid cursed, shook his massive head. He had stood in the presence of something unexplainable, something greater than himself. He couldn't understand it so, characteristically, he put it from his mind. Nor did he waste time in wondering just why that bit of dust had been so damned important to Dwight Cruncher.

He thought of Amelia again. Would she know him if he returned to his old home town? And with that thought was born the first ambition in Rory Kincaid's wasted life. Why shouldn't he return? He'd be rich, richer perhaps than old Colonel King, Amelia's father. He'd be a gentleman. Didn't fine feathers make fine birds?

And Amelia? Surely she'd be impressed by the giant from the west, who'd scatter gold with a lavish hand. She'd be proud to be seen with him. The belle of the town and the boy who'd made good and returned. . . .

A thought had become an idea and in the

span of a few minutes grown to an obsession. That was Rory Kincaid's way. And with his new-found dream to goad him on, he turned away from the trail and plowed through snow to a spot a mile distant. Here, in a scattering of timber, he found a great oak. Standing in his stirrups, he rummaged in the hollow trunk.

This was an owlhoot postoffice, part of the elaborate correspondence system the Plummer men had used. George Brown, the corresponding secretary, had been hanged in Stinkingwater Valley, over a month ago. And Rory Kincaid, thumbing open a letter he found in the hollow trunk, wondered how many weeks had passed since this missive had left his friend in Ohio.

He'd hoped there'd be a letter. He wanted to know about Amelia. An hour before, he'd almost forgotten the girl's existence, and now he craved news of her. And there was news. Rory Kincaid's face tightened as he read the pencilled lines.

"God!" he gasped, and crumpled the letter in his big fist. "God!" he echoed, and smoothed out the sheet to re-read it, hoping he'd been wrong. But the words still danced before him.

. . . . Thrown by a horse. . . . Of course Colonel King sent to Philadelphia for the best doctor. The question is whether this fancy physician will get here in time. They say she's reached the crisis. It's queer to think that we'll know the outcome long before this reaches you. But, be that as it may, Amelia will either be dead or on the road to recovery when this is in your hands.

The letter slid from Rory Kincaid's fingers. Amelia dying! Perhaps dead. . . . It was then that he realized he loved her. He hadn't recognized an emotion so alien to his dark soul, but it had been there. Now another emotion clutched at him—fear!

Had Dwight Cruncher spoken the truth when he'd told of debits and credits in the ledger of life? It was crazy, unbelievable. Yet Rory Kincaid was suffering now. Had

Amelia King been the innocent instrument that was to teach him remorse? If Cruncher was right, then Rory Kincaid's own deeds, this day and in other days, had sealed Amelia's doom.

Chapter II

BLIZZARD-CHAINED

BIG Rory Kincaid wanted to hit something. He wanted to tear and rend something with those huge hands of his. He wanted to take his gun and drive bullets into this thing that baffled him. Violence always had served him, had swept all obstacles from his path. He'd always been bigger than anything that bucked him. Now he was helpless, and it maddened him.

Amelia King, the only person who'd ever awakened a decent instinct within him, had been hurt. He had gold to buy the best medicos in the land. He had strength to take him to her side. But between them lay mountains and a snaking river and trackless prairie—things it would take time to traverse. Neither gold nor brute strength could hurry the slow pace of time.

Thus a taste of the hell he had dealt out to others was returned to Rory Kincaid, there by the hollow oak tree. And he drained the dregs, heedless of time or place, until pelting, flinty particles of snow aroused him to the knowledge that a new force had come to defeat him. The blizzard was upon him!

It roared out of the north in all its unleashed fury, a battering ram of devil-driven snow that quickly blotted out the landscape. Rory Kincaid was into the saddle and floundering away. The instinct to live drove him, and that same instinct chose his trail. He might go onward, but each mile would be longer than the last. He had to have shelter or perish, so he headed for shelter, knowing that he toyed with death when he made his choice.

A few miles distant was a cabin the road

agents had used in days gone by. There were a dozen such hideouts in the hills, but Kincaid had avoided them lately, and in so doing had escaped the noose that had claimed his companions. The vigilantes knew of these hideouts, and might still be watching them. Kincaid's initial plan had been to make a quick dash for Fort Benton. But he'd counted on beating the blizzard.

Now the blizzard was beating him. The cold knifed through his mackinaw to the very marrow of his bones. The horse floundered helplessly, until the big man fell from the saddle, dragged the mount behind him.

Progress was slow and the toil drained even his great strength. He began to wonder how many steps he'd take before he'd go down for good. He longed to cradle himself in the snow, yet knew that meant bedding with death. He knew a fear that was more poignant because it was tinged with superstitious dread. Dwight Cruncher's wild talk haunted him. Hadn't Cruncher said that all things would be balanced before the end? Hadn't he prophesied that Rory Kincaid must atone for his sins?

The news of Amelia's injury was one balancing entry in Rory Kincaid's stained ledger. Kincaid knew the account wasn't closed. There had to be more suffering before death's red ink ruled the columns. There had to be slow agony, out here in this roaring wind—then death!

He was resigned to such an end now; a sense of inevitability was upon him. He had given up the fight at the very moment that he stumbled against something that barred further progress. And his frost-numbed fingers took a full minute communicating the staggering truth to his brain.

THIS was the cabin! He'd reached it! Searching for the door, he passed a lighted window with only a faint stirring

of interest, a subtle prickling of warning. That light meant people were inside—people and fire and food and comfort. Still, those people might be vigilantes, waiting here for the storm to drive him to them. Yet Rory Kincaid fumbled at the door, lurched inside, a snow-shrouded giant, his heavy brows frost-rimmed.

The cabin was a big, one-room affair. Built-in bunks flanked all four walls. A table and several chairs were in the center of the room. Flames crackled in a huge fireplace. Four amazed persons watched Kincaid stumble through the door.

One was a woman, and Kincaid started at sight of her. Her name was Eva, and she was one of Blacky Corbus' honkytonk girls. Now, clad in a somber gown and with the painted, synthetic smile of her profession replaced by a troubled, worried look, she was merely a pretty dark-haired, dark-eyed girl.

Stretched in a bunk was a youngster whom Kincaid knew slightly—a butter-haired, broad-shouldered young man whose eyes were bright with fever. Thor Larson was a freighter who plied between Salt Lake and Bannack.

The third person in the cabin was a stranger, a stubby man with a black beard and the yellow, predatory eyes of a lion. He was a stranger to the outlaw who had found shelter from the storm.

But Rory Kincaid knew the fourth.

He was Dwight Cruncher, the book-keeper who talked like a sky-pilot. And that same fanatical light was in his eyes as they marked Kincaid's tottering progress toward the fire. Rory Kincaid knew what Cruncher was going to say before the book-keeper spoke.

"It's happening," Cruncher exclaimed. "It's happening already. You look like you've come through hell! You're getting yours. And now you've come to us for shelter—come to the man you robbed and the girl you doomed and—"

That was all Rory Kincaid heard. Ex-

haustion had its way with him and he pitched forward on his face. Then he was climbing out of a black abyss, until consciousness came back to him and he found himself in a bunk. It was as though he was bedded with a thousand needles. That was because Dwight Cruncher had removed Kincaid's boots and was industriously rubbing the big man's frosted limbs with snow.

Eva held a spoonful of brandy to his lips and Kincaid accepted it with a sense of wonder and awe. He noticed dark shadows under her eyes, and was aware of a hesitancy in her manner. Did she hate to touch him? Yet, to Rory Kincaid, this was an experience without parallel, for no one had ever nursed him before. Something blossomed inside him, something that might have been gratitude, though he couldn't define it. But it prompted him to frame a question.

"He said I doomed you," he muttered. "What did he mean?"

"Never mind," Eva said soothingly. "Lie back and rest."

"Tell me!" he demanded, with a touch of his old arrogance. "I asked you a question, girl. Answer it!"

She recoiled and, beyond her, he saw the lion-eyed stranger eye him intently. Eva's lips trembled. "Dwight is talking foolishness," she said. "It isn't you that's hurting me, it's Blacky Corbus. I work for him. We're hired to dance and . . . and what else some of the girls do is of their own choosing. Blacky wants me. When he found I was married—"

"Married!" Kincaid roared.

"You wouldn't know," she admitted. "You never so much as glanced at me in Bannack. I married Thor a week ago. I told Blacky, thinking it might stop him. That night Thor was shot. Maybe Corbus did it. Maybe Lippy Rumm or that other gunman of Blacky's, the one they call Yacklitch, did it. It's all the same. I managed to get Thor out here, found this cabin

deserted. Dwight helped me. He's Thor's friend and—"

"You brought your man here?" Kincaid snapped. "I saw him when I come through the door. He needs a sawbones. Why ain't you fetched one?"

"I'll tell you," Dwight Cruncher growled. "We haven't brought a doctor because no doctor would dare patch up Thor Larson. Blacky Corbus has passed the word."

RORY KINCAID disliked Blacky Corbus. Disliked him for his unctuous tongue and dudish ways. He'd slapped Blacky Corbus once, then turned his back on Lippy Rumm and Yacklitch, just to see what would happen. Nothing had. For Rory Kincaid had been a man with many friends then, a member of the dreaded Plummer band.

"What about your damned vigilantes?" Rory Kincaid sneered. "They're bringin' law and order to the territory, ain't they? That's their boast. How come a sawbones has to step light when Blacky Corbus barks? Are the vigilantes scared of Corbus?"

The bearded stranger left his chair and strode to Kincaid's bunk. "The name is McCandless," he said. "I'm from Virginia City. Was bound for Bannack when the storm drove me to these folks. Perhaps I can give you your answer, mister. The most important work for the vigilantes is to rub out the Plummer gang. That chore's about done. Then they'll have time to attend to lesser lights—men like Corbus, who pretend to play on the straight side."

"It sounds pretty," Kincaid scoffed. "Does it mean anything?"

"Bill Hunter was captured near the mouth of the Gallatin a few days ago and hung," McCandless said. "That means Plummer's boys are about wiped out. And the vigilantes found the gold the band had cached. Soon they'll be free to turn their attentions to other things."

Rory Kincaid almost leaped from the

bunk. "They found the gold!" he roared, and then sank back, weak from the effort, shaky with a feeling that his chagrin shouldn't have been so obvious. Who was this McCandless? Rory Kincaid knew a heap about the Bannack vigilantes, knew of their mystic oath and their warning sign—3-7-77—which some said meant a grave three feet wide, seven feet long and seventy-seven inches deep. Did McCandless belong to the Virginia City branch of that law-enforcing group? And did McCandless know he was talking to the last member of the Plummer gang?

"Gold," Dwight Cruncher said bitterly. "That was our last chance. A week from now the vigilantes will be banishing gents like Corbus. But a week from now Thor may be dead. With gold we might have found a doctor whose avarice is greater than his fear of Corbus. Eva had a little dust. I was fetching a little more to add to it."

Rory Kincaid understood. He turned his face to the wall and soon heard McCandless crawl into his own bunk. Within a half-hour Eva and Cruncher were beneath blankets too. It was then that Kincaid slipped from his bunk, shoved his hand into his mackinaw pocket. Comfort and care had given him back his strength, he discovered in crossing the room. Wordlessly he dropped the poke he'd taken from Dwight Cruncher beside the book-keeper's bunk. Wordlessly he crept back to his own blankets.

He lay there, irritated with himself, astonished at his own gesture. Rory Kincaid was going soft! Rory Kincaid was giving away gold when he might need that dust now that the vigilantes had found the cache.

Yet that loss was hardly alarming. It was something else that concerned Kincaid. What about McCandless? Would he hurry to Bannack, just as soon as the blizzard broke, and report that Rory Kincaid was within reach? The big outlaw didn't know,

but the thought troubled him constantly.

Yet he slept. Then suddenly he was awake and aware of a startling truth that announced itself with thunderous silence. The wind no longer shook the cabin, sending snow sifting through the chinks. The blizzard had died.

No weather is as unpredictable as Montana weather. The storm might have blown itself out, or it might be gathering strength for a fresh outburst. But at least the icy wind had lulled and Rory Kincaid knew he was going to take advantage of that lull. He was going to the log lean-to behind the cabin, help himself to a horse and put a hell of a lot of miles between himself and Bannack and the shadow of vigilante justice.

He cautiously pulled on his boots and wormed into his mackinaw. He stepped cautiously toward the door. It was nearly morning, he guessed. Dwight Cruncher and McCandless had alternately fed the fire in the earlier hours. Now the fireplace was a crypt for dying embers. Dwight Cruncher snored lustily and Thor Larson moaned and mumbled in uneasy sleep.

Rory Kincaid was almost to the door when, prompted by a sudden presentiment, he silently crossed to the bunk where McCandless had bedded.

He wanted to be sure that McCandless hadn't taken advantage of the storm's lull. And he had his answer instantly. McCandless' bunk was empty.

Chapter III

3-7-77

MCCANDLESS was gone! And there was no doubt in Rory Kincaid's mind but that he had left for Bannack. Perhaps he had several hours start already. Perhaps the vigilantes were already floundering through the drifts, preparing to close in on Kincaid. The thought sent terror

lancing through the outlaw, but fear whetted his caution. Silently he eased from the cabin and moved to the lean-to that sheltered the horses. Light from a lantern seeped through the cracks of that crude structure.

Kincaid palmed his gun, kicked the door inward and leaped inside.

The girl called Eva dropped the saddle she was trying to hoist to a horse's back, and turned wide eyes upon the outlaw.

Kincaid's great hands gripped her shoulders. She was lost in the folds of a man's mackinaw.

"*You!*" Kincaid bawled. "You're headin' to Bannack, too. You're goin' to tell the vigilantes where they can find Rory Kincaid. You're hopin' they'll give you some measly reward to add to that dust you're collectin'!"

Eva's cheeks flushed. "And would that be so awful?" she challenged. "Do you think I'd care what happened to you if it meant saving Thor? But it wouldn't work. The reward wouldn't be enough. This gold idea was a fool's hope. It takes too much gold to outweigh an ounce of lead. That's why we didn't bother searching your clothes for Dwight's gold while you were unconscious."

"But you figgered on turning me in," he went on relentlessly. "That's why you kept me from flickerin' out when I keeled over in the cabin. You figgered I was worth more alive than dead!"

"It isn't so!" she insisted. "I'd have warmed a snake if it had come crawling in last night. So would Dwight. But even if it were so, I wouldn't feel ashamed. Thor Larson is more important to me than a thousand men like you. Do you understand! Why should I care about you? When you came to the Hurdy-Gurdy House you never looked twice at me. I wasn't your kind of woman—and I'm proud of it. You're no better than Blacky or those two hirelings of his. You take what you want because you're big and strong.

All the happiness I've ever had, I've had to sneak or steal. . . ."

She trembled, choked back a sob. "Cruncher's crazy on an idea of his. He thinks everything balances up. I wish I could believe it. I wish I could be sure Thor and I would be paid for what we've endured. But things don't work out that way. If they did, a swell gent like Thor wouldn't be dying. But why am I talking to you, when you couldn't begin to understand? Now will you take your filthy hands off me and let me saddle my horse?"

"Where you goin'? What are you figgerin' on doing?"

"Thor's worse. He's delirious, and I'm afraid he's dying. I'm going to Blacky Corbus. I'm going to . . . to let him have his way with me—if he'll only send a doctor out here."

"No!" Rory Kincaid shouted, and was startled by his own explosiveness. Why should it matter what sort of a bargain she struck with Corbus? What did it matter that Thor Larson lay dying in yonder cabin for want of a doctor?

Yet, looking at this slip of a girl, he was seeing courage greater than his own, strength such as he'd never possessed. And he couldn't forget that she'd worked to restore him from the blizzard's ravages after he'd robbed Dwight Cruncher and, in doing so, robbed her.

Suddenly he thrust her aside and with one huge hand picked up the saddle, tossed it onto the horse. Without a backward glance he headed into the night. And his trail led toward Bannack.

WAS it a new-born sense of gratitude that prompted him? The workings of a long-atrophied conscience? Rory Kincaid didn't know. But a thought persisted. Dwight Cruncher had spoken of the ledger of life, the debits and credits that had to balance in the end. Could he make amends? Would the thing he intended to do swing the balance so that Amelia King, who had

stood at the crossroads, might live?

That was loco. Even the slow-working mind of big Rory Kincaid recognized the madness of it. Amelia had reached her crisis weeks ago. By now Amelia was either well or mouldering in her grave. No act of his could possibly change that, for Amelia's fate had been decided. It was like trying to make himself believe that any deed of his could swing the sun backward, or make rivers flow from the sea to their source.

Was he clinging to a delusion because there was nothing else to cling to? Or was something else driving him to Bannack and the double-edged peril that waited there—a thing he didn't allow himself to dwell upon? Eva had unconsciously touched the truth when she'd said he'd never given her more than a glance.

And So Rory Kincaid battled the drifts to come again to Bannack. He had thought to turn his back upon the camp forever, but with a dying moon fighting to pierce the storm-scudded sky, he looked once again upon the silvery cluster of snow-swathed cabins of the gold camp.

A strange sense of loneliness stalked with Rory Kincaid down the deserted main street. Once he'd been cock-of-the-walk here. Once he'd had the Plummer band to back him, to leap to his defense at the shaping of a cabalistic sign or the whispering of the password, "Innocent." Now he was an outcast, a man who lived on borrowed time.

He left his horse and marched toward the cabin of Doctor Cavendish. The gray-headed medico had plucked lead from many of the Plummer men, had served all who had needed his services, asking no questions, making no demands. Two months ago Kincaid would have strode boldly to the medico's door. Now he skulked along, peering nervously to left and right, his gun in his hand.

He found the place in darkness when he inched the door open. After fumbling

around with matches he finally succeeded in lighting a kerosene lamp. Doc Cavendish stirred in his bunk, opened sleep-fogged eyes. Rory Kincaid's gun swung to cover him.

"Howdy, Doc," Rory Kincaid said. "Maybe you heard tell there was a patient for you—feller name o' Thor Larson. Maybe you heard tell a certain gent might give you a hot-lead payoff, was you to go to patchin' Larson. I'm tellin' you that's exactly what you'll get anyway if you don't hop into your britches and come with me! What do you say?"

Doc Cavendish stared with the stupid look of one not thoroughly awake. Then he grinned slowly, his round face lighting up. He reached for his boots.

"I'm no fighter," he chuckled. "I let others sling guns and I patch up what's left afterwards. Yeah, Blacky Corbus told me what would happen if I sewed up Thor Larson. And I didn't hanker to have Lippy Rumm or Yacklitch lining sights on me. But I know Thor Larson—a fine boy. I've been hoping somebody would come along and sort of *force* me to go to him, whether I wanted to or not. But I sure as hell never expected it would be Rory Kincaid. Tell me, Rory, what's your stake in this?"

"Damn it, how can I tell you when I don't know myself?" Rory Kincaid exploded. "Now quit your jawin' and get yourself ready."

Doc Cavendish favored him with a startled stare. Then he nodded. The medico dressed himself silently and just as silently wormed into a heavy mackinaw. Rory Kincaid watched him impatiently, restlessly striding the width of the cabin. He'd have no trouble taking Doc Cavendish along, for the doctor was more than willing to aid the stricken freighter. Still Kincaid kept his gun handy.

Were Lippy Rumm and Yacklitch somewhere out there in the shadows, watching to be sure the doctor didn't leave camp? It didn't sound reasonable that they'd keep

a twenty-four hour vigil over the Bannack medicos. Probably they were satisfied that Blacky Corbus' warning was enough, that no doctor would defy Corbus.

No, it wasn't the shadowy threat of Corbus' gunhands that rasped on the nerves of Rory Kincaid, but another menace. Where was McCandless? Surely the man had come to Bannack!

"Hurry, Doc!" Rory Kincaid urged. "You got to take all morning gettin' that case ready?"

"Coming," Doc Cavendish murmured and snapped the case shut.

Rory Kincaid jumped.

It was only a slight sound he'd heard, no more than the snapping of an icicle—or the crunching of a bootheel in the hard-packed snow of the street. But it was enough to jerk him around. It was enough to send him to the door. Dragging it open, he peered into the gloomy street.

The first rays of dawn were blossoming in the east, cold colors that painted a frigid sky. The light was uncertain, but Rory Kincaid could have sworn that a man darted into the dark shadows between two cabins. And that man had been eavesdropping on Rory Kincaid and Doc Cavendish. The proof of it was there in the snow beneath the cabin's window.

Yet that wasn't the sign that drew and held the startled eyes of Rory Kincaid. It was another. Snow lay banked and crusted before Doc Cavendish's cabin, an alabaster bulwark four feet high. And there somebody had traced a legend with a stick, or a stubby forefinger, a legend that was discernible even in this dim light—the vigilante warning: 3-7-77.

Chapter IV

RENDEZVOUS OF NO-RETURN

THE vigilantes had marked Rory Kincaid for death! And Rory Kincaid didn't stop to wonder why anybody had

taken the trouble to warn him. It was enough that he'd been warned, that the cryptic message in the snow meant that the vigilantes knew he was here, were probably closing in on him. Kincaid shivered in spite of himself.

He'd anticipated that Blacky Corbus might try to stop him from taking a doctor from Bannock. Now he knew another force was on the march to checkmate him. The vigilantes wouldn't be interested in a wild story of a wounded freighter, and a doctor whose hands were tied. Not now. They'd only be interested in hanging the one road agent who'd eluded them to the very last—Kincaid!

So Rory Kincaid grasped Doc Cavendish's elbow and hurried the medico down the street toward the livery stable. Hell-roaring Bannack was coming to life. Somewhere an axe rang vibrantly and one sleepy voice called to another. Somewhere a belated wayfarer greeted the dawn with off-key, discordant, maudlin song. But Rory Kincaid was alert for another sound, the ring of many boots in the packed snow, the coming of the vigilantes.

Now they were abreast of Blacky Corbus' Hurdy-Gurdy House. Now they were past that place of dubious pleasure. Thin light was driving away the shadows, sending the minions of night scurrying in retreat. Corbus' place was twenty paces behind them . . . thirty paces . . . fifty paces. . . .

"Doc!" a strident voice called. "*Where the hell do yuh think yuh're goin'?*"

Rory Kincaid spun on his heel. Two men had slouched from Corbus' place. One was tall and thin. The other was stubby and seemed to be as broad as he was tall. The only similarity between Lippy Rumm and Yacklitch was in their black garb and in the deadliness that stamped each. The gun leaped upward in Rory Kincaid's hand like a flash of light.

He had driven a bullet toward them, a bullet that sent them leaping for cover,

before he saw the horsebacker who walked a jaded mount between the cabins. Instantly Rory Kincaid forgot his deadly intent as he leaped toward the pony. With one rough gesture he pulled a bundled figure from the saddle, dragged the startled rider between two buildings. Doc Cavendish was at his heels.

"Eva!" Rory Kincaid sputtered. "In the name of common sense, what are you doin' here?"

It was she. Her wide eyes flickered from Rory Kincaid to Doc Cavendish, then lighted with understanding.

"You meant it!" she gasped. "I—I couldn't believe it. At first, when you left, I was sure you were heading for Bannack to bring help. But afterward, with Thor getting worse, I began to wonder. I couldn't take the chance. I had to come. . . ."

KINCAID swore luridly. He was seeing again the courage and the strength of this mite of a girl. But any spark of admiration within him was dimmed by thought of the complications her presence brought. He eased to the corner of the sheltering building, peered. A gun exploded and Rory's sombrero jumped into the air.

The road agent's gun answered, and a howl of anguish testified that the slug had struck pay dirt. He grinned at the girl and the medico. "Nicked Lippy Rumm, I figger. He jumped near a foot."

His grin faded as a new thought struck him. Darting to the rear of the building, he cautiously poked his head into view. Instantly he was bobbing back as a Colt spoke.

"Didn't nick him deep enough," he muttered. "Lippy's watchin' the back. Yacklitch is at the front."

That just about summed it up. Yet there was more than one factor to consider and all of them weighed heavily on the mind of Rory Kincaid. Penned here, they were stalemated, neither side anxious to expose

itself to the other's fire—a deadly game of "I-Spy." Corbus' gunhands had them sewed-up, but time might give Kincaid a chance to break away. But time was a precious thing now, for time might bring the vigilantes to hang Rory Kincaid.

"There's only one of 'em at each end of the building," he observed to Eva and the sawbones. "Maybe, if we wait, they'll get others, and then close in on us. And if Larson's gettin' worse, you can't afford to wait. Best make a run for it. You two start down the street, and get under better cover as fast as you can. I'll keep Yacklitch busy till you're into saddles."

"But you?" Eva cried. "How will you get away?"

Rory Kincaid swelled his great chest. "Me!" he scoffed. "You think any two-bit gun-slingers, like that pair, can keep me cornered once I've a mind to walk out of here? I just don't want to take any chances on 'em trailin' you and Doc. Now get to hell outta here!"

She must have realized that most of this was bluster. She came close to him and he found it hard to meet her eyes. "Thank you, Rory Kincaid," she said. "I don't quite understand this. It doesn't make sense that you'd want to do things for me. You used to avoid me at the honkytonk, you know."

And then he voiced the thing he hadn't let himself think about. "You . . . you sorta reminded me of a girl I used to know," he blurted. "A girl back in Ohio. I . . . I never touched her, either. . . ."

She kissed him, a gesture quick and impulsive, and he stared, wide-eyed, wondering at the fragile might of women. He would have spoken but she was grasping Doc Cavendish's arm, hurrying him toward the building's end. And Rory Kincaid knew that this was not the time for words.

He stepped boldly into the street. Boldly he faced the squat form of Yacklitch, triggered swiftly. Behind him he heard the thud of boots as Eva and Doc Cavendish

zig-zagged away. He wanted to turn and mark their progress, but he didn't dare. Fire snaked along his hip, brought him to one knee. But Yacklitch was clutching at his stomach, bending slowly forward. Then the Corbus gunman fell on his broad face, to kick out his life in the snow.

NOW Lippy Rumm was aware that something was amiss. The lanky man deserted his post and came charging around the building, his gun spouting flame. Lead smashed into Rory Kincaid's shoulder, almost drove him backward. His great strength was draining with his blood, but he had enough of it left to pump a bullet into Lippy Rumm, watch the man clutch at the building with nerveless fingers, sprawl across the body of Yacklitch.

Rory Kincaid slowly pulled himself to his feet. He swung his massive head, his eyes probing for Eva and Doc Cavendish. They were gone, but far down the street were many figures, a relentless knot of men who marched forward toward Rory Kincaid.

And because Colonel Sanders led the group and black-bearded McCandless of Virginia City flanked the Vigilante organizer, Rory Kincaid knew the purpose of these men. They were coming to hang him!

Yet he watched them with a detached interest, as though he were some remote, uninvolved spectator. Fear of one sort or another had beset him ever since he'd first left Bannack, but now all fear had gone. Pain fogged his mind, but one thought stood out clearly. He'd had some sort of job to do and he'd finished it. Or had he?

Then he was turning his back upon the vigilantes, lurching down the street toward the Hurdy-Gurdy House. For now he remembered that his work wasn't finished. Blacky Corbus was still alive. Blacky Corbus had bullied a girl, a girl who looked like another girl back in distant Ohio. So Blacky Corbus had to die.

The grim purpose that spurred him gave Rory Kincaid new strength. He might have used that strength to elude the vigilantes. He might have bent his footsteps toward safety, instead of toward death. Yet he didn't. This morning he'd served others for the first time in his misspent life. This morning he'd found the meaning of unselfishness. It was a strange experience, but he liked it. And so the new Rory Kincaid stepped through the doorway of Blacky Corbus' place.

The honkytonk had one large room, with a bar at the far end and a raised stand for an orchestra at one side. Drinks had crossed that bar at fifty cents each, and champagne at twelve dollars a bottle had bubbled here. This floor had known the sibilant scrape of bootsoles as men had danced, paying one dollar in gold dust for the privilege of brief minutes on the floor.

But now the room seemed the bigger for its emptiness, for only one man was here when Rory Kincaid entered. Blacky Corbus, immaculate in broadcloth and white silk, stood in the center of the room, his swarthy, handsome face knotted in a frown. Blacky Corbus had heard the gunshots, was waiting for his men to report. But Lippy Rumm and Yacklitch would never return.

"Howdy, Blacky," Rory Kincaid said. "You're wearing a gun. Get to it!"

The flick of Corbus' hand was proof enough that the man knew why Rory Kincaid sought him. Blacky Corbus had courage of a sort—and wiliness. Those things had made him wealthy, and kept him just within the law. But it was desperation that sent his hand plummeting to his belted gun. The weapon became a live thing, jerking, spitting.

A bullet droned dangerously close to Rory Kincaid's ear. It was the whisper of death, but Rory Kincaid only grinned. He might have had all the time in the world as he leveled his own piece. He might have been toying with the trigger as he squeezed it. Blacky Corbus spun, flung his arms

upward, as though appealing to a Deity he'd long since forsaken. And when he hit the floor he was dead.

RORY KINCAID pouched his gun, turned. The vigilantes were in the room, a milling throng of them who surrounded the big road agent and disarmed him. McCandless was with them, but there was no triumph in his yellow eyes.

"Why did you stay?" he demanded. "I followed you to Doc Cavendish's office. I was going to make the doctor come and attend to Larson. I heard what you told Cavendish, and it sort of changed my opinion of you. But hell, man, I'm under oath to run your kind down! Maybe I stretched a point when I left a warning in the snow. But you didn't have sense enough to understand!"

Rory Kincaid only shrugged, knowing that words would avail him nothing.

Colonel Sanders nodded gravely.

"You know why we've taken you, Kincaid," he said. "You'll have a trial."

And Rory Kincaid, scarcely hearing him, grinned. A trial. . . . After that, one last walk to the gallows. But Rory Kincaid had at long last recognized a power that shapes such things, glimpsed a pattern in which he was a little piece. And somehow the fantastic theory of Dwight Cruncher didn't seem so fantastic now. He'd balanced the books. He'd made amends for his sins, even though the vigilante court would not recognize his redemption. And though Amelia King's fate had long since been decided, back in Ohio, Rory Kincaid knew—strangely, unexplainably—that she was alive this day.

"Let's get going," he said gruffly.

That was when he raised his eyes and saw Eva and Doc Cavendish coming toward him. Impotent wrath flamed within him. They had no business here! He'd fought to give them a chance to be on their way. Now they were back.

"We had to come," Eva said breathlessly. "I had to know what happened to you. I didn't want Thor to live, if his life had to be bought with someone else's. He wouldn't want it that way, either."

Colonel Sanders doffed his hat. "I'm sorry, ma'am, but you'll have to leave."

Her eyes misted with understanding. "You're going to hang him! You're going to do that, when he practically gave himself up to you in order to save my husband's life? No—no—!"

Then she was babbling a story of a man's dark desire and a dying freighter and of gold stolen and returned. And Colonel Sanders listened respectfully and was silent at the finish. Finally he cleared his throat.

"I wouldn't have believed it," he muttered. "Mr. McCandless, here, tried to tell us some such yarn, but we in Bannack know Rory Kincaid. I'd have sworn that he came back only to settle some personal grudge with Blacky Corbus. He's stubborn enough to thrust his neck into the noose, just to satisfy his personal vanity. But this! And yet . . . Gentlemen, our law decreed death for all who deserved punishment. Lately we've decided upon banishment for lesser crimes. And so I ask you to weigh Rory Kincaid's crimes in other days against this thing he did today. Gentlemen, is your verdict banishment?"

* * *

Only a fool would have tried it. Between Bannack and Fort Benton the miles are many and the trail was a death trap, that bitter February day of 1864. A raw wind, whimpering in the draws, hinted that another blizzard was building even as big. Rory Kincaid reined on a ridge for a last look at the gold camp.

Yet Rory Kincaid looked backward without regret, for he was going home, and Amelia King was at trail's end. Once she'd smiled at him. And this new, humble Rory Kincaid could only hope that she'd smile again, for that was all he asked.



They charged back down the street. Guns yammered. . . .

Young Tom Smith set out to avenge his parents, massacred at Mountain Meadows, and wound up in Satan's own railroad terminus at Bear River City . . . where only martial law stopped the slaughter that later sent Smith to a hero's grave!

RAILS WEST— TO DAMNATION!

By NEVADA DICK

BY 1868 the Union Pacific Railroad had pushed westward into Wyoming, its rails winding like a huge serpent over the heavy grades where the towns of Aspen and Altmont now stand, and on into the new terminus at Bear River. Bear River, today a ghost town, was once the most hard-bitten, Hell-roaring

terminus of the whole U. P. R. R. system.

It boasted of being the toughest camp on the entire line; haven for riff-raff of all races and creeds from the four corners of the earth. In addition to this motley collection of males there were those ladies who pursued the oldest profession in the world. Cynical-eyed harlots made no bones

as to their calling. These vampires plied their trade unhindered, filching cash from the workers with gesticulating bodies and painted smiles.

The chronology of events in this fair early-day city would be incomplete without mentioning one of its leading characters, one Thomas J. Smith. Smith was made an orphan when a train of emigrant Missourians, with whom he was traveling, was attacked in southern Utah, September, 1857, in what is known today as the Mountain Meadows Massacre. The massacre was allegedly planned by one John Doyle Lee and his cohorts.

Escaping the fate of his parents, young Smith was later rescued by Indians, who turned him over to another wagon train. This outfit took him to Nevada, where he secured work. Smith grew into a sturdy, fearless youth, his sole aim in life to wreak vengeance upon those responsible for the slaughter at Mountain Meadows.

To fit himself for the task, he lived a clean outdoor life. Haunting gunslick camps, he sought killer aid in schooling him in all the arts of gunplay. In time he became deadly accurate with either hand; one of the West's real two-gun men.

He tracked, found and killed two of his parents' murderers, before he challenged and cut down the notorious Big Bill McCadden, reputed to be the fastest lead-slinger of his time. Smith called McCadden in a saloon in Las Vegas. When the smoke cleared, McCadden's mundane career had ended. Stepping over the body of the outlaw, young Tom mounted his horse and took the vengeance trail after John Doyle Lee.

Still seeking Lee, Smith drifted across the west until, in 1868, he neared the Union Pacific terminus at Bear River. He needed funds to continue his quest, and so sought employment. While looking for work he was in high hopes of finding Lee, or some of his pards, among the bad ones who teemed in Bear River.

SMITH found Bear River a town of crooked streets, rickety shacks, tents, honkeytonks and deadfalls; items which seemed to spring up, flourish and then die the next morning. Gambling and drinking were pastimes indulged in religiously by the graders and teamsters when off duty, and the owners of Bear River City's dives reaped a golden harvest.

Death was popular here. A wrong word spoken, an accidental collision with some ruffian filled with raw whiskey, and powder burned immediately. Seldom was any investigation made into sudden demises; the survivor usually went his way unmolested.

In time, a Vigilance Committee came into being, but its methods were almost as vicious and bloodthirsty as those used by the gangs it attempted to subdue. Many an innocent man, in addition to hombres who really needed killing, felt the hang-rope around his neck.

At the end of the street, Smith saw a large sign: CASEMENT BROTHERS RAILWAY EMPLOYMENT OFFICE. Smith dropped out of his saddle, grounded his pony and marched into the office.

A big man, sparse of hair and red of face, stood glaring at a hard-looking individual, whose large frame seemed to fill the room. Tom's entrance was unnoticed, so absorbed were the two men with each other.

"Yuh can't run a sandy onto me," blustered the hard-looking gent. "Iffen yuh let me go, who's goin' ter handle th' crew, Mr. Wallace?"

"Get out!" Wallace bawled. "I've stood enough bullying from you, Hank. You're done, even if the work stops."

Hank's big frame crouched and murder gleamed in his wicked eyes. Then, like a maddened bear, he lunged for Wallace.

Like lightning, Smith's six feet of bone and muscle catapulted forward. Bands of what must have felt like steel encircled Hank's brawny neck. "Want him thrown out?" Tom inquired quietly.

Wallace nodded, his big face white.

Grasping his victim by his shirt collar and belt, Tom rushed him to the door and slammed him out and down into the dust of the street. Smith stood in the doorway, waiting for what might come. Hank, however, got up and strode off without a word.

As Smith turned back into the office, Wallace stepped forward, approval in his eyes. "Thanks, stranger," he said. "You sure saved me a heap of trouble." Wallace looked almost sadly after the retreating Hank. "Hank was in charge of the freight supply train, and now the Lord only knows who I can get to handle those tough teamsters."

"I'm lookin' for a job my own self," Smith said. "Reckon I could handle your crew."

Wallace thoughtfully regarded the husky young man, noted the gray-blue eyes and the muscular six-foot frame. "You're hired," he suddenly clipped and, without preamble, proceeded to instruct the new boss freighter in his duties.

Thus did Thomas J. Smith make his debut as a worker on the Union Pacific line.

AS TIME passed, Tom Smith became the recognized champion of the railway workers and, by his unswerving loyalty to the men under his command, looked upon as their leader. A clean liver and firm believer in fair play, he refused to allow any man to be condemned without first being given every chance to prove his innocence.

Circumstantial evidence was enough to convict a man in the eyes of the Vigilantes, but not so with Tom. Smith rescued many a gent from their clutches, proving to them that what seemed like a hanging matter was, in reality, a mere personal fight, and should be treated as such. Thus Vigilante prestige suffered and Smith became something like a thorn in the sides of the amateur lawmen.

On other occasions, Tom Smith invaded

gambling dens and vice dives to save members of his crew from those who sought to roll them for all they had and then unceremoniously chuck them into the street.

These parasites, resenting Smith's interference, fed fuel to the feud existing between the railroaders and the Vigilance Committee.

And the day soon came when the feud let blood flow. With Smith out of town, the Vigilantes seized one of his assistants, a harmless youth known as Slim. They dragged him before a Citizens Court and tried him on a charge of murder. Slim, unable to prove his whereabouts at the time of the crime (he had been with Tom Smith) was quickly convicted and sentenced to be hanged.

Word of the affair reached Tom quickly. Instructing his men to follow as quickly as possible, the boss freighter rode to the locale of the hanging.

A scene of mad confusion greeted Smith when he hit the city line. Down the dusty street surged a motley collection of drunks, barflies and gunmen—the scum of the gambling dens and hell-holes of the town. Derisive yells, shouts and pistol shots filled the air. Leading the mob strode Big Hank, the man Smith had heaved out of Wallace's office, months before.

The frame-up was rotten to the core. Tom's enemies were obviously using poor Slim to wreak vengeance upon the leader of the railroad workers. Hands bound behind his back, the condemned man shuffled along in the mob's center. A rope was already about his neck. Smith, fighting mad, halted the leaders of the mob.

"Listen, you scum," he snarled. "You're making murderers of yourselves. Like a bunch of sheep you follow one of the worst examples of lawlessness in this camp, bent upon dealing death to an innocent man, for spite."

"Shut up!" yelled the drunken rabble. "Get out uh th' way. We're agoin' ter lynch a killer this time, in spite uh yuh."

Powerless to stop them, Tom turned his horse and dashed madly back to the open range, hoping against hope his friends would arrive in time to prevent the lynching of an innocent man.

He met his men at the edge of town and they charged back down the street. Guns yammered and slugs snarled over the heads of the mobsmen. The crowd broke, many taking shelter behind barrels and crates, and returned the fire. Those in charge hustled the prisoner off to the recently completed city jail.

A number of Vigilantes took refuge in the general store, a massive log structure. Smith, almost insane with the fervor of combat, charged the building alone and, in some unexplainable way, gained the fort's interior.

Both guns blazing, the intrepid leader demanded their surrender. Twenty men threw up their hands, but before Tom's men could reach him, one of the party sneaked a hide-out gun and fired three shots into the boss freighter's body. Smith fell, desperately wounded, and as he lay weltering in blood, the battle was resumed.

THE desperadoes, bent upon annihilating the Vigilantes, joined the graders in looting and burning the town.

Destruction continued for three days. Many died from gunshot, others by the knife. During all this time Tom Smith lay unconscious in the log fortress.

Saloons raided by the furious mob yielded drink that kept the men in a state of frenzy. Three days of bedlam reigned, before troops arrived from Fort Bridger and placed the town under martial law. During the reign of terror, Slim and all other inmates of the jail were released and

the building burned to the ground. Among other buildings razed was that which housed the *Frontier Index*, a newspaper.

With the arrival of the cavalry, order was soon restored. The badmen who still survived took to the brush, leaving their dead and dying cluttered about the streets. Thirty men were killed and one hundred wounded during that fight, which history designates as the Bear River Riot of 1868.

Tom Smith was taken to Fort Bridger where, after hovering between life and death for two months, he finally recovered.

Sickened at the carnage resulting from the fight at Bear River City, he became a changed man, swearing never again to use his guns, except as a last resort. He served for a time as marshal in the new terminus of the Union Pacific, at Trinidad, Colorado, then answered the call to serve as marshal of wild Abilene, Kansas.

Here, bare handed, he tackled some of the most desperate and dangerous men to be found on the frontier, disarming them and placing them in jail. "Any officer can bring in a dead prisoner," he often said. "But I'd sooner deliver them alive."

Grass has covered the site of Bear River City, and the town is almost forgotten. But Bear River Tom Smith's name and record remain among those who helped in settling the American Frontier. His body lies in a hero's grave in Kansas. Over it stands a monument, upon which is inscribed the following:

Thomas J. Smith

Marshal of Abilene, 1870

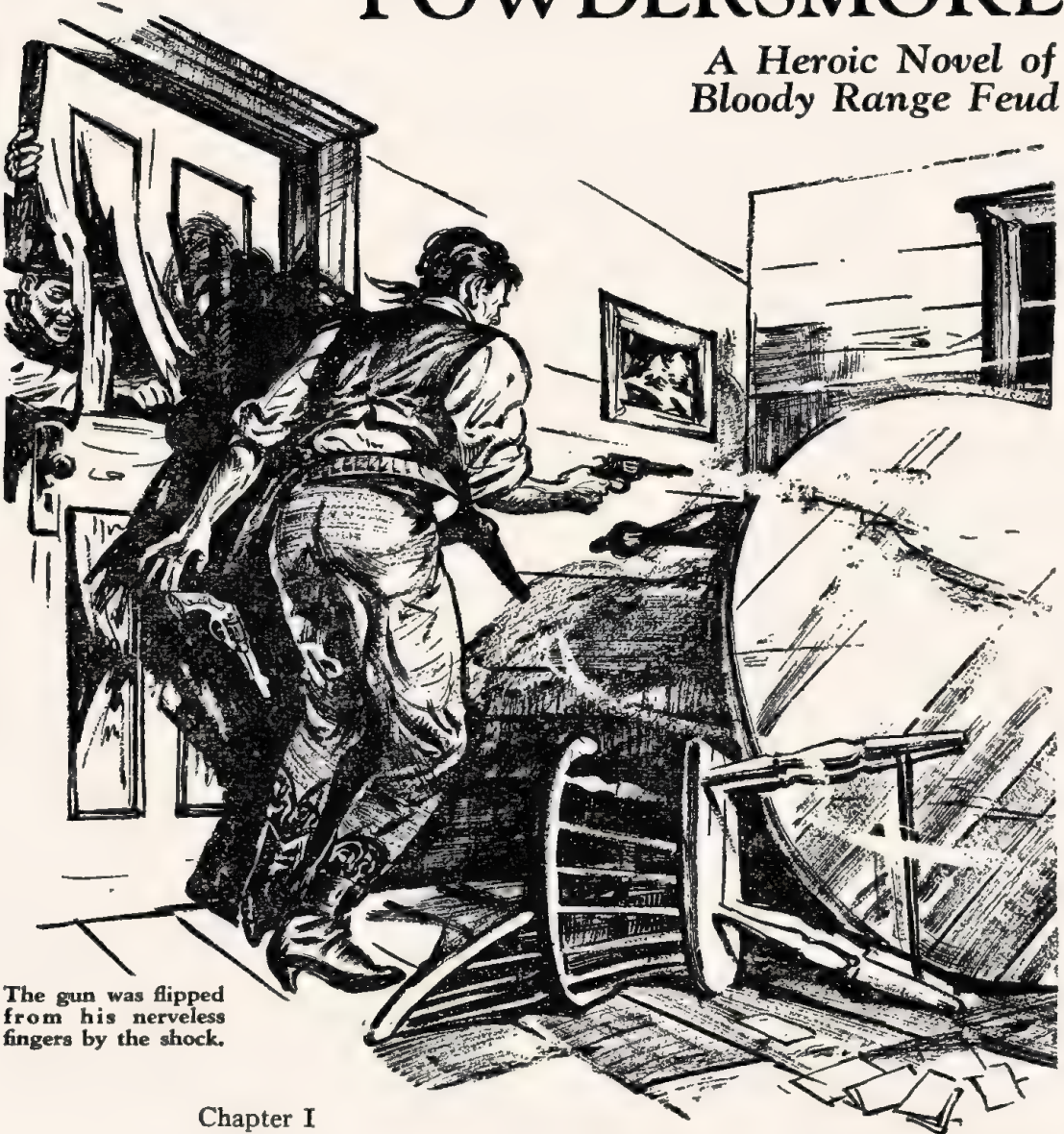
Died a martyr to duty, Nov. 2nd, 1870

A fearless hero of frontier days, who, in cowboy chaos, established the supremacy of law.



POWDERSMOKE

*A Heroic Novel of
Bloody Range Feud*



The gun was flipped from his nerveless fingers by the shock.

Chapter I

TROUBLE IN LONG RIDGE

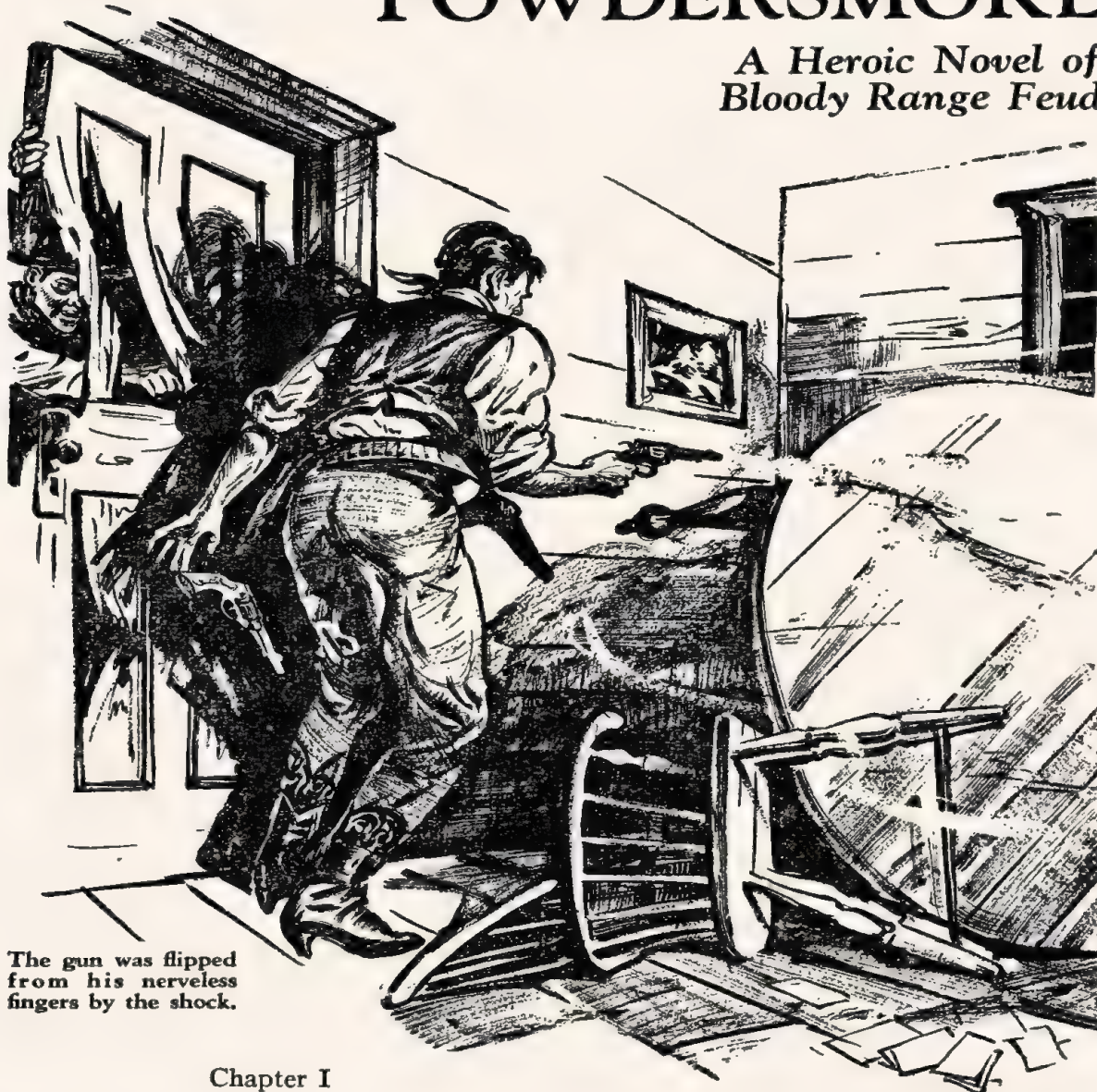
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He had spent two whole weeks out there in the lava beds, mulling the thing over by lonely campfires, trying to convince himself that he had done right in swallowing his pride and giving in. If he had stuck to his little ranch in the Rio Seco, it would have meant more gun fighting, more dodging bushwhacker bullets, seeing his herds dwindle slowly under the ruthless attacks of night riders.

Kessler's domination of the whole rangeland had been a red and hateful thing. Brave men lay mouldering in shallow graves

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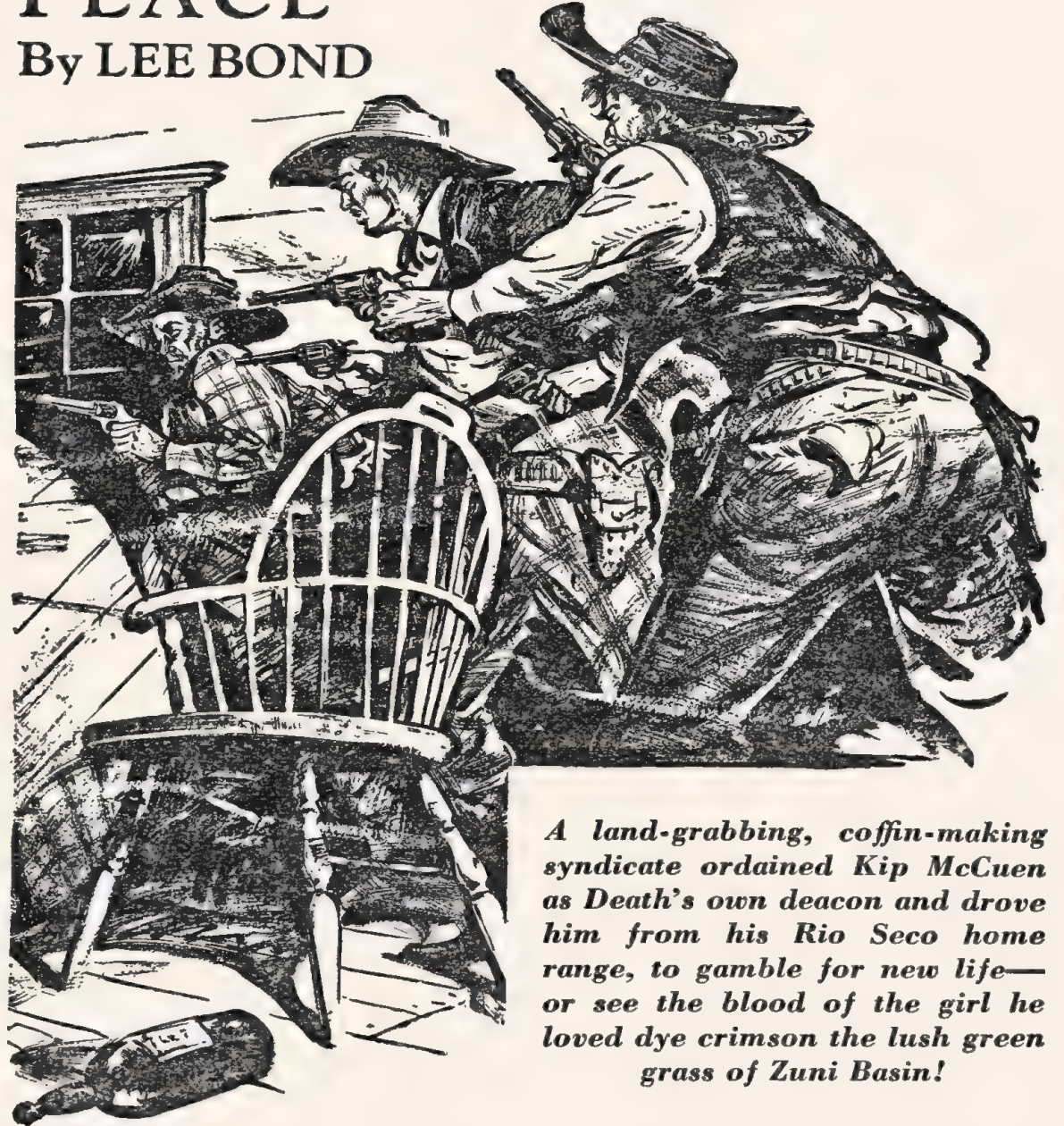
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PEACE

By LEE BOND



A land-grabbing, coffin-making syndicate ordained Kip McCuen as Death's own deacon and drove him from his Rio Seco home range, to gamble for new life—or see the blood of the girl he loved dye crimson the lush green grass of Zuni Basin!

on the Rio Seco because they had fought for what was rightfully theirs. But to Kip McCuen, seeing the suffering of the widows and children of those neighbors who had died in vain had been the worst.

Realizing that even a few more weeks of hanging on meant either death or being forced into outlawry by Kessler's power, McCuen had sold his land and stock to the aggressor and ridden into the badlands. He

had meant to forget the whole thing, ride to some new range and make a fresh start. He had promised himself that when he had knuckled under. But forgetting, he had discovered, was not easy. Instead of finding peace, once, the red range was behind him, he had discovered only bitterness, self-condemnation, and a feeling of futility.

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He had thought of returning and throwing the weight of his guns on the side of

those stubborn souls who still fought on, despite Kessler attacks. But McCuen had soon realized that such a move would simply bring swift death to those he tried to help. Let them alone, let them stand leaderless, and at least some of them might live.

McCuen's thoughts were still on Rio Seco when his big dun topped the hills. The trail up had been long and slow, and McCuen had ridden with his tall body slouched forward, while he stared unseeingly at the sere stone and sickly brush about him. He straightened now. His keen gray eyes sharpened and focused on the huddle of buildings which lay in a cup at the base of the ridges.

This would be Long Ridge, a small, isolated town that once had boasted a tough reputation. The place looked tame enough now, McCuen reflected. He was directly above it, looking down upon the dusty street that was flanked by adobe buildings. Several buildings had tin roofs that gleamed dully under the hot Arizona sun. Long Ridge seemed almost deserted.

As McCuen rode on down the tortuous hill trail and came closer to the street, he saw that the town was not as dead as it had at first appeared. There were saddled ponies at three hitchrails, while several rigs had been drawn into the shade of pepper trees in a vacant space between two buildings.

From a sooty little structure came the clear song of a blacksmith's hammer, and McCuen spotted a half dozen loungers in the deep shade of a store porch. The loungers looked up at him as he rode into the high end of the street, and he felt an instant wariness, a tightening of nerves.

MCCUEN laughed, and the sound was bitter with self-reproach. He had no reason to fear the looks of other humans, he reminded himself angrily. He was no outlaw, skulking into town for a few brief hours of carousal. He was just a rancher

who had shown the white feather instead of fighting for what was rightfully his.

Cursing under his breath, the man from Rio Seco glared toward the curious loungers, then turned his dun into the wide gate of a feed and livery establishment. The oldster who came out of the little barn office to greet him studied him briefly but intently out of puckered eyes that were as sharp as the eyes of a hawk. Again McCuen knew the quick tightening of nerves, and found his own glance reaching out over the corral, running along the pole fence, stabbing the black maw of the driveway which led into and through the rambling barn.

A dry chuckle brought McCuen's glance back to the barn man. The old fellow was looking down, looking at the two black-butted guns slung low against McCuen's hips.

"Don't fret about anybody bein' scrooched in the barn or behind the fence ready to pick you off, McCuen," the oldster said.

McCuen looked hard at the man. "I don't remember meetin' you, old timer."

The oldster spat an amber stream into the dust, smiled faintly. "We never met," he admitted laconically. "I've heard you described so often, though, that I knowed you on sight. No offense meant." He spat again, added: "My name is Jim Orr. I own this barn. Want the dun grained?"

McCuen was almost at a loss for words. There had been reserve in Jim Orr's words, as if he were disappointed.

"Grain the dun, Orr," McCuen said evenly. "And don't misunderstand a man. I meant no offense."

Before Orr could answer, a horse galloped into the lot. McCuen heard Orr curse gruffly, saw him start forward to meet the slender girl who was curbing a jittery sorrel. Kip McCuen found his eyes suddenly glued to the girl's small face. He read trouble in the paleness of her cheeks, in the way her gray eyes flicked at him

uneasily. Her lips trembled as she swung lithely down from the saddle to face Jim Orr. McCuen looked away, realizing that he had been staring almost rudely at her.

He turned to his own mount, began loosening the saddle cinches. But he did not forget that small, worried face, nor the strange light he had seen in the girl's eyes. He kept remembering the way brown hair had curled beneath the brim of her Stetson, and the lithe grace of her slim, young figure.

She was unusually pretty, and McCuen kept trying to figure out what sort of trouble could be deviling her. And because he was thinking so much of a girl he had had only glimpsed, he cursed harshly under his breath as he loosened the cinches and pulled the saddle and sweaty blanket from his dun's back.

He led the pony into the barn runway, hung the saddle on a rack, and put the dun in an empty stall. He stepped back into the runway a moment later to hang the dun's bridle over the saddlehorn. As he stood there he heard his name spoken sharply from somewhere beyond the runway door. It was the girl, and her tone was angry.

McCuen stepped quickly to the door. The girl was just springing aboard the snorty sorrel, and for a brief moment her eyes found him, lashed him contemptuously. Then she put the sorrel about on slim hindlegs, and sent the horse thundering out the gate and along the town's dusty street.

McCuen took off his hat, ran long fingers through a mop of thick, tow-colored hair and turned inquiring eyes on old Jim Orr. Orr sauntered forward, bony face blank.

"Still want your horse grained, McCuen?" he asked coolly.

The tall rider reddened, looked into the dust cloud which hid the girl and her sorrel, then back at Orr. "I still want my horse grained," he said levelly. "And I'd like to know—"

"Then grain he gets, Mister McCuen," Orr cut in.

ORR stepped past McCuen and into the runway with an alacrity that belied his seamed features and gray hair. He had put enough emphasis on the word "Mister" to let McCuen know he was about as welcome here as smallpox.

McCuen's jaw tightened until muscles bulged beneath the smooth tan of his skin. He jerked his hat on almost savagely and strode swiftly across the corral. He reached the gate and was going through when coarse laughter sounded along the street ahead of him. McCuen looked in that direction.

A vagrant breeze from the desert was cutting away the fog of alkali dust stirred up by the sorrel the girl had ridden. Then the dust thinned under a fresh puff of wind and Kip McCuen was suddenly running down the hard dirt walk.

The girl had halted her bronc at one of the hitchracks, and was standing in the dust beside the horse, trying desperately to free her slim right wrist from the hand of a big, red-headed man who laughed mockingly down into her flushed face.

There was an expensive Stetson lying on the walk behind the man, and McCuen saw a pliant quirt clutched in the girl's imprisoned right hand. As he approached he saw her left hand flash up, pluck at the quirt, try desperately to slide the loop of it free from her right wrist. The red-head's laughter grew louder, and his left arm slid about her slim shoulders.

"You larruped me acrost the head with your damned quirt, with half the loafers in town lookin' on, Miss Hell-cat," he boomed. "Now you'll pay for that little stunt. I'm kissin' you, with all these gents watchin'."

McCuen, walking slowly, pushed through a crowd of grinning men who stood watching the girl and the burly red-head.

The girl lifted a small boot, sent the toe of it smashing against her tormentor's knee-

cap. He swore in pain. Laughter suddenly left his broad red face and small, deep-set blue eyes. His left arm slammed the woman forward. His right hand twisted her slender forearm backward and down.

His face bent swiftly toward her white cheeks, and a guttural sound bubbled in his throat as his lips moved toward her mouth. But suddenly that animal sound changed to a yowl of pain.

Kip McCuen's right arm shot out. He caught the ample nose of the red-head between the first and second fingers of his right hand. McCuen's fingers squeezed and wrenched sharply.

The red-head released the girl and howled in agony. His powerful arms tried to grab his grinning tormentor. McCuen maintained his grip and brought his right knee up savagely into the burly one's heaving middle. The red-head's breath left his barrel chest in a wheeze, his thick legs gave way and he fell down on the ground.

Looking down, McCuen sized the big fellow up for the first time. He was no ordinary cowpuncher. He wore an expensive broadcloth suit, and his boots were shop-made. The gold and silver plated spurs would cost an ordinary cowpoke almost a year's pay. The specially built cartridge belt about the fellow's middle supported a pair of hand-tooled holsters. The guns nestled in those holsters were beautifully engraved along the backstraps, and had ivory grips.

McCuen stooped and slipped the guns from the fancy holsters, whistling as he saw that not only backstraps but the frames, trigger guards, cylinders and barrels were engraved.

The man on the ground was gasping, beginning to move sluggishly. McCuen stood a moment undecided, then opened the loading gate of one engraved gun and emptied the cylinder of cartridges. He repeated the operation on the second gun.

"These guns," he observed quietly, "are too good to be tossed around in the dirt.

Here, fella. Hand 'em back to the big gent when he gets his wind."

McCuen turned lazily as he spoke, offering the sixshooters to a seedy-looking hombre in the crowd. The man took the weapons gingerly.

McCuen's sharp glance sought the girl he had helped. But both she and the sorrel horse had vanished. McCuen felt a swift thrust of resentment, and stood looking along the street.

A half-smothered yell from directly behind him caused him to whirl suddenly. But he never completed the turn. Something struck him savagely along the side of his head. He felt his legs go weak, and knew only hazily that he was falling.

Chapter II

WAR CLOUDS GATHER

KIP McCUEN strangled a little on the whiskey that trickled down his throat. He pushed feebly at the hand that held the glass. A voice spoke to him—a voice that was almost tender.

Kip blinked, drew a lean palm across his eyes and forehead. He saw her clearly then, the girl whom he had rescued. His mind flashed instantly back to the affair on the street, to the big red-head he had kned in the belly; to the blow that had robbed him of his senses. His head throbbed maddeningly and there was a sense of weakness that held him still while his gaze sharpened upon the girl.

He was on a cot, and about him were rough walls, the smell of hay and stalls and sweaty leather. There was a paper-littered desk in an opposite corner, and a tattered armchair beside a table which held a cheap lamp. This, McCuen knew, would be the barn office. He saw it, recognized it for what it was without his mind or eye leaving the slender woman who stood beside him.

She was meeting his eyes levelly, trying,

he guessed, to decide whether he were fully conscious or not. Her face was pale beneath the crown of curly dark hair, and her full, young bosom rose and fell.

Had this sort of thing happened to him two years ago, Kip McCuen would have made some remark to the effect that that blow on the head had killed him, and he was plumb to heaven, since here stood an angel. But now the idea seemed foolish, and he rejected it.

The Kip McCuen of two years ago was dead—consumed in the red flame of guns that had burned life and laughter from the Rio Seco country. The McCuen upon the cot was much older, much grimmer, than just two years should make any man. He wondered wearily, as he lay there, just how deeply the change would affect his present and future life.

He was conscious of the girl's sweet beauty, yet thought, at the same time, of the trouble that had come to him in this town. He remembered the scornful tone in which she had spoken his name. Finally he said, "Hello," simply to break the silence.

She straightened sharply at his voice. Without a word she turned, ran lightly across the barn office and out through a door.

"Hell!" McCuen muttered.

He swung long legs off the cot, got to his feet. The movement sent pain drilling into his head. Exploding fingers told him that there was a sizable lump above his right ear. The skin had been broken, and blood was matted in his hair. Using a wadded bandanna, he wiped the blood away gingerly, while his eyes ran over the room. He saw his guns and belts and Stetson piled on the floor, just inside the door, and went toward them.

He had the belts slanted about his flat hips, the gun-filled holsters settled properly, and was absently slapping dust from his hat when the sound of voices reached through the thin walls to him. He could hear swift footfalls, too, and moved back a

little, inwardly cursing the old, tense expectancy that two years of trouble had fused into him.

The door clicked open and the girl crossed the threshold, her face flushed, her eyes sharper, more troubled than ever.

Behind her came old Jim Orr. They halted at sight of McCuen, the girl momentarily hesitant as she tilted her head to look quickly up into his grave face, then glance away under the cool touch of his impersonal eyes.

"Here, McCuen, finish the rest of this toddy I stirred up and left Carolyn to feed you," Orr chuckled. "And say hello to Carolyn Turner. She's the brains that keeps the Seven K runnin', despite them damned Pollard brothers and their Rollin' R hellions."

To Kip McCuen's surprise, Carolyn Turner held out a slender hand, a smile touching her lips as she looked up into his eyes. He took the hand, said something about it being a pleasure to meet her, and found himself reluctant to release the slim, firm fingers.

"I OWE you an apology, McCuen," Carolyn Turner said, in a voice that sounded good to McCuen's ears.

"Apology?" he echoed. "I can't figure how you could owe me an apology, miss."

"I owe you one, too," Jim Orr declared. "I had a friend help me pack you down here, so's we could talk. But first I'm polishin' off this toddy, since you don't seem interested."

He drained the glass at a gulp, wiped his lips with the back of a hand, then put the glass down on the corner of the littered desk.

McCuen was paying no attention to Orr. He was watching Carolyn Turner, who had opened the door and was peering out intently. Then she closed the door, leaned against it and looked at McCuen, her eyes shadowed.

"Yes, Uncle Jim and I both owe you an

apology, Kip McCuen," she said slowly. "When you rode in here today, Uncle Jim thought you had come to throw the weight of your gun skill on the side of the Pollards. What you did a while ago, coming to my aid as you did, I mean, would seem to disprove the suspicions we held."

McCuen looked from Carolyn to Orr, then back again. They saw his face go grim, saw hard lines etch the corners of his flat-lipped mouth.

"I don't know what you're talkin' about, miss," he said quietly. "I never heard of anybody named Pollard. And I didn't come here to mix into any kind of fight. A man who'd let a pack of bulldozers run him out of one place wouldn't be apt to hunt trouble too soon."

Before he realized it, McCuen was telling them of those two red years along the Rio Seco. He talked of the unmarked graves of men who had died defending what was theirs, and of the widows and children who had faded from the scene, helpless victims of the Kessler Pool's greedy drive. He told of his own fight, and of his final surrender to superior strength.

"So that's me," he finished bitterly. "I showed the white feather, let the pool bully me into sellin' out for about half what my place was worth."

McCuen's voice ended abruptly. He realized, suddenly, that he was talking too much, and was embarrassed with the knowledge. But his embarrassment was short lived. Carolyn Turner came across the room to him. Her hands fell lightly upon his arms.

"Thank God, I've had the pleasure of knowing one man who is big enough to put the welfare of others above his own pride and purse," she said.

Her voice was throaty, and tears stood in her eyes. Unable to understand Carolyn's full meaning, he glanced over her head to find old Jim Orr almost scowling at him. He felt a quick pressure of the girl's hands, and heard a sound that could

have been a choked sob. But when he glanced down at her she was turning, moving back to the door again.

"I'm some stumped, McCuen," Orr's voice cut into the silence.

McCuen looked at him. "I'm stumped about a few things myself," he admitted.

"I see you are," Orr nodded. "And you bein' stumped is what has got me stumped."

"Which gets more mixed up as we go along," McCuen replied.

"Mean to say you fought a bunch you name the Kessler Pool for two solid years without knowin' who was actually bossin' that pack?" the stable man challenged.

"Morg Kessler was behind the crowd," McCuen answered simply.

"You're wrong, Kip McCuen."

Carolyn Turner's voice brought McCuen's glance to her. She had her back to the door again, the spectre of trouble shadowing her eyes.

"Wrong?" he repeated slowly. "I don't see how I could be, miss. Kessler was right there, makin' no attempt to hide the fact that he was organizin' and bossin' that lobo pack he called a cattleman's pool."

"Morg Kessler," Carolyn said wearily, "is just a tool. Of course he posed as boss of the killers who were ruining your country. He was sent there to do that."

"Sent there?" McCuen asked sharply. "You think Morg Kessler is only a hired man?"

"We know he is," Orr snapped. "Until two years ago, Morg Kessler was ramrod of the Pollard Rollin' R. The Pollards sent Kessler down yonder to your Rio Seco country to boss their newest batch of hell-raisin', which they call a cattleman's pool. The Kessler Pool, you call it."

McCuen's eyes had turned suddenly hard. His broad shoulders twitched.

"So Kessler is only a hired hand," he said finally. "But knowin' that wouldn't have changed things for me, I guess."

"No, knowing that Morgan Kessler was

only hired to boss that pool wouldn't have changed your mind about selling," Carolyn Turner told him. "You sold not because you were personally afraid, but because you were big enough to make the sacrifice rather than lead other men to their deaths in a hopeless fight."

"The Pollards know that, too," the grizzled barn man scowled. "That's why they circulated them stories around here, McCuen."

"What stories?" the tall rider asked quietly.

"Haze and Dan Pollard let it be known that you had finally thrown in with them, and that you *might* come here to help carry out their orders," the girl cried. "They were afraid of you, Kip McCuen. Stories of your lone-handed fight against that Kessler Pool of theirs leaked out. Up here, we people have heard a lot about you. Once, we even talked of sending men to help you hold your ranch. But the Pollards heard of our plans—and we needed every able-bodied man on these ranges after that."

"You aimed to send help to me, a complete stranger?" McCuen was incredulous.

"That was the talk goin' around," Jim Orr declared. "You see, McCuen, this girl here, and other ranch owners like her, have cause to sympathize with any man who has the guts to fight that Pollard outfit. The Pollards are runnin' these ranges here, just as they ruined your country. Carolyn has held out against them two hellions fairly well. But they've got her hemmed in now. They own range all around Zuni Basin, which is her Seven K. They're ready to start the big squeeze against her any day."

For a long moment silence held, there in the stuffy barn office. McCuen read desperation in Carolyn's paling cheeks, and he saw again the film of dread shadow her eyes. But she stood with squared shoulders, her little chin up. Plucky, McCuen thought.

Yet, something cold was taking hold of

him, something that tightened his nerves, made him want to shudder. A wisp of a girl like Carolyn Turner standing out against a range war such as he had known along the Rio Seco? It seemed incredible, impossible. Yet McCuen knew it was so. He could see the blight of the trouble in the girl's face, in her eyes. And old Jim Orr had spoken with grim conviction when he mentioned that the Pollards were doing here what they had done in the Rio Seco country.

"These Pollards," McCuen's voice broke the stiff silence. "Who are they? I'd like to meet the gents, I think."

The girl and old Jim Orr exchanged quick glances. Then the barn man chuckled, tugged at one ear lobe. "You met the Pollards," he said simply. "That big red-headed son you caught botherin' Carolyn is Dan Pollard, youngest of the brothers. Haze, Dan's older brother, slapped you down with a .45. Haze is the real brains of the outfit, and as dangerous as a blind rattler, though he don't seem so. I reckon you'll be runnin' into Haze again, after what you done to Dan."

"You'll be running into Haze Pollard too soon, Kip McCuen," Carolyn Turner said tensely. "He's coming here right now. Dan is with him."

She had been peering out the door again, but had turned, speaking swiftly, genuine alarm in her eyes. She took a few swift steps, clutched Kip McCuen's arm, and tried to turn him about.

"There's a back door to this office," she said almost frantically. "There, just beyond the bunk. Get out that door. Uncle Jim and I will keep the Pollards and their pet killers busy while you escape. Go quickly!"

Kip McCuen looked down into Carolyn's face for a long moment without replying.

"You said something about these Pollards havin' a pet killer with 'em, miss," he observed finally. "You think they're comin' here to make trouble?"

"I know it!" she cried. "Please go while there's time. Nat Graw is with Dan and Haze. They brought him here to—"

"To do their fightin' for them?" he inquired, as her voice choked off. "Well, we'll see about that, Miss Carolyn. I'll find out what these Pollards and their gunthrower have under their hats."

Before either she or Jim Orr could stop him, McCuen was at the barn office door. He stepped down into the broad runway and moved leisurely along it until he stood in the great doorway. A few paces beyond him three men came to a halt. There was silence. Kip McCuen stood in the runway door, his long arms relaxed at his sides, his face a brown mask that told nothing of what went on behind his hard eyes.

Chapter III

KILLER TRICK

HAZE POLLARD, old Jim Orr had said, was the brains of the many schemes of the two brothers. Standing there in the doorway, studying the three men, Kip McCuen could easily understand why Orr had said that about Haze Pollard.

Haze was even larger than Dan. His broad, flat-cheeked face was expressionless, his eyes tiny blue points that shone behind fleshy lids. In contrast to his dandified brother, Haze Pollard looked like a tramp in soiled levis, unpolished boots, gray woolen shirt that needed washing and a sweat-marked Stetson that had long been ready for the rubbish heap.

McCuen studied Haze Pollard briefly but carefully, and was glad that Jim Orr had dropped the hint about Haze having brains. A man could easily be fooled by the wooden face and hooded eyes of that slovenly giant.

He transferred his sharp glance to Dan Pollard, who stood glowering at him in open hostility. Dan still looked a little white around the mouth, and his left hand

was pressed tenderly to his belly. Dan Pollard, McCuen decided, was somewhat proddy but still feeling the effects of that jolt in the midriff.

McCuen looked at Nat Graw, and felt the hackles lift along the back of his neck. He had heard nasty tales about that wizened devil's crimson past. Graw's thin blue lips and the beak nose reminded McCuen of a hawk. He felt the impact of the little gunman's beady black eyes, and had the feeling that those eyes seldom blinked.

"You Kip McCuen, from the Rio Seco country?"

It was Haze Pollard who asked the question. His voice was a rumbling bass, neither friendly nor hostile.

McCuen nodded, but said nothing.

Dan Pollard cursed, lifted a hand to his red nose to feel gently of that member. Nat Graw twitched his thin shoulders and spread his spiderly legs farther apart.

"You built quite a rep for yourself down in the Rio Seco country, McCuen," Haze Pollard said. "I'd like to have a little talk with you."

"Figurin' to offer me a job, Pollard?" McCuen countered.

"Told you he'd be too damned cocky to handle, Haze," Dan Pollard burst out. "Hell, my way is the only way to manage this feller."

"Your ways brought on this whole thing," Haze grumbled. "Now shut up and let me do the talkin'."

He turned his attention again to Kip McCuen, who was keeping a keen watch on Graw. A faint sense of uneasiness stirred in McCuen, and he felt the old, bitter resentment boil up within him.

Haze Pollard's talk, and Dan's sudden outburst would have seemed natural things to the average observer. But behind big Haze's apparent calm, and Dan's seemingly sullen and angry mien, there was something false. Just what was wrong, McCuen could not decide. But he was playing a hunch that Nat Graw was the man to

watch, and this hunch seemed to bear fruit when he caught the little gunman edging slowly but steadily away. Graw hardly lifted his feet, yet he was moving inch by inch, trying, McCuen saw, to pull away from the two Pollards.

"I could use a man like you on my payroll, McCuen," Haze Pollard said. "Anybody that rides for me will tell you that the grub is good and the pay high. You and Dan had a little run-in, I know. But that can be patched up."

"I tell you he won't listen, Haze!" Dan almost bellowed the words. "That Turner filly and old Jim Orr have probably filled his head with ideas about us. The thing to do is—"

IT CAME then, came with a suddenness that caught McCuen napping, despite the fact that he had been watching Nat Graw. Suddenly Graw sprang like a cat. He plunged toward the corner of the barn, a thin yelp bursting from his lips as he moved. Graw's hands were diving for the butts of holstered guns, and he was whipping those guns up from leather when the first blast of firing roled heavily over the barn lot.

McCuen staggered, cursing when he realized how neatly he'd been tricked. A bullet fanned his cheek, others whacked solidly into the door facing beside his head. And that lead death had come from the guns of the Pollard brothers instead of from Nat Graw's weapons.

That realization flashed through McCuen's mind as he let his long legs fold under him. He heard Carolyn Turner cry out, heard old Jim Orr order the girl to stay in the office. But McCuen's hard eyes were on the two Pollards, watching them spring from behind the screen of smoke their guns had spewed into the still air.

McCuen's own Colts were in his hands as he struck the floor. He fired right and left, saw Dan Pollard twist sidewise, drop his fancy sixshooters and sit down very

hard. Big Haze Pollard was firing into the runway, his great body hurtling forward behind spitting guns. McCuen had rolled away from the spot from which he had first fired, and now his guns roared again. Just as he was pressing down on curving triggers, a bullet came raking in from the side, tearing a spray of splinters from the sill before him. His reaction to the slug spoiled his aim, and he saw Haze Pollard waver, then break to the left, passing from view.

McCuen rolled sidewise, brought his two guns around and let the spiked hammers fall against cartridge primers the moment he glimpsed Nat Graw crouching almost above him. The blast of his guns seemed to pick the scrawny gunman up, whirl him half around, then drop him. Graw's guns fell a yard wide of his hands, and McCuen sprang up, backing into the runway, his eyes alert.

Dan Pollard was on his feet, weaving uncertainly away toward the corral gate, both hands clamped to his side. There were no sounds from outside now. McCuen stood for long seconds, his guns ready, fully expecting Haze Pollard to come bursting into the square of light at the runway door. Then he heard the faint slogging of heavy steps along the outside wall, left from the runway opening. The heavy treading stopped when a strident yell sounded from somewhere in the corral.

McCuen crouched back in the shadows, began hastily reloading his guns. Haze Pollard's deep tones had answered the man who had yelled. McCuen's natural assumption was that recruits were coming, and his long fingers flew at the task of filling those gun chambers. That done, he stood in grim readiness, listening to a mutter of low voices out there beyond the warped board walls of the barn.

"You, McCuen! Hear me?"

McCuen stiffened at the thin, nasal voice. He hesitated a moment, suspecting the speaker of trying to trick him into giving away his location. The voice came again.

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BRAZES AND SOLDERS



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"I think you hear me, McCuen!" the speaker called. "This is Ben Kell, town marshal, speakin'. Come out of there with your hands up. You're under arrest!"

Before McCuen could answer, Carolyn Turner came racing from the gloomy depths of the barn. She called to him in a law and urgent tone, and McCuen saw that she was trembling.

"Our horses are saddled and ready to go," she whispered tensely. "Follow me!"

"Hold on, little lady." He caught her arm as she started to turn away. "That gent out there who calls himself Ben Kell claims to represent the law." McCuen kept his own voice low. "I've done nothin' to make me afraid to face a court. If I run for it, though—"

"Don't you understand?" Carolyn cut in. "Ben Kell is a Pollard tool. If you go through that door, you'll be shot to death. But answer Kell. Stall a few more seconds, which will give Uncle Jim time to let down the poles at the back of the corral."

McCuen frowned. He didn't like this idea of running. As he had meant to point out to the girl, fleeing from the town would be the worst move he could possibly make, so far as a court would be concerned. Yet he realized that if Kell was a Pollard tool, as Carolyn insisted, then stepping out the door might easily mean death. The boldness of the murder plan the two Pollards and Nat Graw had sprung on him only a few moments earlier was enough to convince him that the Pollards felt no need of masking their skullduggery.

He could hear the rumble of Haze Pollard's voice out there now. Those deep tones were interspaced by the nasal twang of Ben Kell. The two men were moving along the barn wall, advancing toward the runway door.

"Say something to them!" Carolyn Turner whispered urgently.

"I wouldn't come any closer to that door

if I was in your boots, Pollard!" McCuen's words lashed the silence to bits. "That goes for you, too, Kell."

The stealthy tread of booted feet, the scrape of rough clothing against the wall boards, stopped instantly.

"Defyin' the law, are you?" Kell demanded.

There was an uneasy squeak in the town marshal's voice that brought a mirthless grin to McCuen's lips.

"You better take it easy, McCuen!" Haze Pollard roared. "You've raised hell enough as it is."

"Maybe I haven't even started yet," McCuen retorted.

"Cut out your fool talk and get out here," Kell's angry voice demanded.

"Not until I know whether this is another trap," McCuen answered sharply.

"Good work," Carolyn Turner whispered. "Keep stalling them. But when you hear me whistle, come running. With luck, we may make it to the hills."

McCuen looked down at the girl, sudden realization of the danger a break from this barn would mean tightening his nerves. "I'll ride for it alone," he told her crisply. "You just give me the signal, and I'll take the chances."

"We both ride for it," she told him levelly. "You got into this because of me, Kip McCuen."

"But that outfit will open up on us with guns!" he warned. "There's no sense in you runnin' such a risk. I'll make out."

"We ride together," she answered steadily. "No, don't argue. You'd be run down in half an hour if you tried this alone. But when we make the ride, follow me. I think I know a trick that will work."

Before Kip McCuen could utter a protest, the girl was gone, running lightly away into the gloom of the driveway. And from beyond the thin board walls Haze Pollard and Marshal Ben Kell were cursing McCuen, wanting to know why he did not answer their questions.

"Maybe the slippery son pulled out on us, Ben," Haze Pollard said angrily. "I thought I heard a noise around back some place. Keep an eye on the door yonder while I circle the barn."

Chapter IV

A RACE WITH DEATH

THE noise Haze Pollard had heard behind the barn was made by old Jim Orr as he frantically tore poles from the corral. Kip McCuen guessed that. He knew that he had to stop Haze Pollard from circling to the back of the barn. He heard the heavy thump of Pollard's feet, and lifted his voice in a ringing command.

"I told you to stand hitched out there, Pollard!" he yelled. "Are you dumb enough to think the boards beside you will stop my lead?"

"Go easy, McCuen," the big ranchman boomed. "I won't let you crowd me much farther, damn you."

"I'll crowd you right into hell on the end of a bullet if you move again," McCuen advised. "Stand hitched, while I try to figure this thing out."

"I'll do the figurin'," Ben Kell shrilled. "McCuen, cut out this horse play and surrender peaceable."

"How do I know you and Pollard won't open up on me with guns the minute I show myself?" McCuen demanded.

"What's the matter, you scared?" the marshal taunted.

"Maybe," McCuen told him. "On the other hand, maybe I'm just cautious. I poked my head into a gun trap out there a while ago."

"This ain't no trap," Kell declared emphatically. "I'm here to uphold decent law and order. If you think—"

McCuen heard no more. A faint whistle came from the far end of the broad driveway. It might have come from a songbird, perched atop the barn. But Kip

McCuen knew it for what it was, and something tightened up inside of him as he whirled and ran swiftly over the hay littered driveway.

He found Carolyn Turner at a wide back door, holding the loosened door hasp in one slim hand, lest the portal swing open. She tightly clutched the reins of her snorty sorrel with the other hand, and McCuen knew a strange sort of terror when he realized that the next few moments might bring death to this girl who stood smiling so calmly at him.

He shoved his guns into holsters, caught the door hasp to which she clung. His own big dun horse, saddled and bridled, stood there, reins trailing. McCuen lifted the reins with his free hand, tossed them over the dun's black mane.

"I wish you'd not run this risk, Miss Carolyn," he said grimly. "But I reckon you won't listen. So mount, while I hold the door shut. We'll ride out of here at a run."

She went nimbly into the saddle, crouched low to be well beneath the beam over the door. McCuen strangled an oath when he saw her right hand reach back to a saddle pocket and lift out a man-sized gun.

"Leave the gun work to me," he said hoarsely.

She looked down at him, a sad and somehow pitying smile touching her lips. "Don't be shocked at my having a gun in my hand," she said quietly. "I've fought these Pollards and their hired gunmen for two years, you know. Come on, we're losing precious seconds!"

With a curse at his own helplessness to talk the girl into staying, and a prayer that no harm would come to her, McCuen gave the broad door a violent shove. He whirled, and was in the saddle, crouching as the girl crouched, before the great door was fully open. Then Carolyn Turner's spurs struck the sorrel and the horse bolted out into the lot, slim legs pistoning as

the girl's spurs stung the satiny flanks.

Kip McCuen reared up the moment his dun was outside, dropped tied reins over the horse's outstretched neck and jerked out both guns. His spurs were lifting the dun into a mighty run. McCuen was hipped over in the saddle, his rust-flecked eyes hard and bright as he watched the corner of the barn around which Haze Pollard and Ben Kell must come.

"Kip, watch out!"

THE girl's frantic cry brought him around in the saddle. He saw a gap in the pole corral, saw Carolyn's sorrel ram crazily on, fighting the bit with which the girl tried to lift it over the three feet of pole fence which still remained in the gap. For a sickening moment McCuen thought the heady sorrel would crash into the low barrier, go tumbling end over end with the girl. But just as the sorrel's forelegs seemed certain to strike the remaining poles, the beast responded to the upward tug of bit and the quick stab of spurs. The sorrel cleared the remaining poles neatly, and McCuen felt weak and shaken, as if he had just awakened from some terrible dream.

His own mount needed no tug of rein and gouge of spur. The big dun arched nimbly over the low barrier without breaking stride, and McCuen was lifting an arm to sleeve the sticky sweat from his pallid face when the first harsh drone of death snarled past his head. He twisted sideways in the saddle, right hand gun slanting back.

At the rear corner of the barn Haze Pollard had dropped to one knee, gripping a smoking sixshooter in both hands for steady shooting. McCuen's thumb was lifting the hammer of his own gun to send a shot back at the kneeling giant when a gun boomed deafeningly beside him. He saw Haze Pollard rock backward from a geyser of splinters that were plucked from the corner of the barn beside him. The

POWDERSMOKE PEACE

big rancher fired a bullet into the sky and scrambled hastily, if somewhat clumsily, behind the protecting barn corner.

McCuen dropped the gun hammer he had lifted when a gaunt scarecrow of a man came plunging into view around the barn. The gaunt one did an amazingly swift about-face and disappeared again, but not until McCuen had caught the hard sheen of a badge on the flapping vest.

"Now ride!" Carolyn Turner's voice shrilled above the beat of hoofs and rush of wind.

McCuen faced around, holstered his guns and looked at the girl. She met his glance, and the gravity in her eyes did not match his feeling that they were over the worst of it. She was swinging south, and McCuen knew then why she had looked so concerned. Ahead lay an open meadow that sloped gently away toward a deep ravine. But instead of heading directly for the protection of the ravine, the girl was angling down the meadow.

"Swing east!" McCuen cried at her. "That ravine yonder—"

"Follow me," she cut in, and her small spurs lifted the sorrel into a mighty run.

Kip McCuen cursed into the wind that whipped his face. His spurs hooked at the dun's ribs, and the big horse did better than follow the sorrel. Neck and neck, the broncs went down the meadow, McCuen still cursing under his breath and keeping a weather eye on the barn and corral. They were almost circling the place, and try as he might he could find no sensible reason for taking this course.

Kip was not surprised when he saw the great hulk of Haze Pollard rear up to the top corral pole, to hunker there and begin shooting. The thin-faced scarecrow who wore the badge and was, McCuen guessed, Ben Kell, joined Pollard on the corral fence, and began shooting too. But the distance was too great for their sixshooters, and McCuen was beginning to breathe



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easier when a third and fourth man hopped to the top bar of the corral.

"Down, Carolyn!" he yelled, for the newcomers held rifles.

A moment later the two long guns were belching smoke, and Kip McCuen heard the clatter of a bullet tearing through his camp tools rolled in the slicker and blankets behind his saddle. He pulled his right hand Colt, tilted the muzzle sharply, and sent what slugs the cylinder held howling toward the men atop the corral fence.

He had no idea of hitting any one of the four. But the luck that had been with him in the corral held, and one rifleman fell sprawling to the earth. The other three dropped hastily from sight, and McCuen turned to the girl, a grin of triumph on his lips. But the grin faded and his face turned sickly white beneath the healthy tan of sun and wind.

Carolyn Turner was slouched forward over the pommel of her saddle. Her hands groped weakly for the tossing mane of the running sorrel. Kip saw that her right sleeve was bloody from shoulder to elbow.

"The damned hounds shot her!" he snarled, and reached frantically for Carolyn as her slender body started sliding from the saddle.

Chapter V

KIP GETS A SURPRISE

THE touch of McCuen's hands frightened her out of her stupor. She cried out, her grip on the rocketing sorrel suddenly firm. Her hat fell off, the wind caught at her dark hair and whipped it into McCuen's face, almost blinding him.

"Let go!" she cried.

"You're hurt," he said hoarsely.

"I know," she answered steadily. "It hurts like Hell. But I'm all right. Let go."

He released her, looked anxiously into

her white face. To his amazement she was riding upright now, handling the reins expertly in her left hand. McCuen looked at the bloody right sleeve, and knew blinding rage when he thought of those four men who had hunkered atop the corral to shoot at this girl, as if she were some desperate criminal fleeing a just punishment.

"You all right?" he yelled anxiously.

She looked around at him. Her face was still pale, but she smiled, nodded reassuringly. Then she was swinging the racing sorrel from the meadow into the ravine. There was thick oak timber along the ravine, and McCuen saw the sparkling sheen of a small creek.

"Thank God that's over," he groaned as they dropped beneath the rim.

Carolyn, crouching to avoid sweeping branches, sent the sorrel on into the timber. Her curly hair streamed out behind her like a dark banner as McCuen watched her jockey the sorrel through timber at a pace few men would have tackled.

"Plucky, that girl," he muttered. "A fine kid, kicked around by that damned Pollard pack until she's near the end of her rope. She's runnin' on pure nerve, has been for some time, unless I'm fooled. If them Pollards keep shovin' her—"

He stopped muttering when the dun roared across the little creek, sending a silvery spray high into the air. Carolyn had already crossed the stream, and was racing toward heavy timber on the opposite bank. But instead of riding into the timber she spun the sorrel suddenly and went tearing up the ravine.

McCuen's jaw sagged. Was the girl daft? Turning back up this ravine was practically retracing the course they had ridden across the meadow. The hazard of being out in the open was gone, of course, for the high banks and thick timber protected them, sheltered them from view. But to ride up the ravine meant losing the distance they had gained, as McCuen saw it. He raked his dun's ribs, crowded up

close behind Carolyn Turner's sorrel.

"Miss Carolyn!"

"Ride!" she cut in, without glancing around.

McCuen cursed through his teeth and rode, since there was nothing else to do. He kept hoping the ravine would broaden out, or that the timber would thin, so that he might range up beside the girl. She slowed the sorrel to a long lope, yet her dodging, twisting, weaving trail through the timber prevented him overtaking her until they were at the head of the watercourse a half hour later. Their mounts were just about run out.

Kip's anxious eyes had never left the girl, and that ride, to him, had been an agony of fear, lest she fall. A number of times he had seen her weave uncertainly, and had shouted to her, begging her to stop. But she had ignored his pleas. Now, however, the timber was playing out, the creek was becoming a thin trickle between rocky banks as the ravine pitched steeply up against an oak-clad ridge.

McCuen's spurs drew a last spark of speed from the big dun the moment the timber thinned, and he was beside Carolyn in a few bounds. He reached out, caught the bridle reins and hauled the blowing sorrel to a dead halt.

"Stop it!" Carolyn cried. "It isn't far now to the fence. Just on top—"

"There isn't timber enough for you to dodge me in now, young lady," he cut in. "Here, you're letting me have a look at that arm."

He dismounted, plucked her from the saddle as if she were some helpless youngster. She struggled for a moment, and warm color stained her cheeks as he held her cradled in his arms.

"PUT me down," she demanded. "And if you think—I mean, after all, you can't—"

"This, my plucky little goose, is no time for willy-nilly nonsense," he clipped.

He lowered her to the ground, but did not release her.

"I'm all right," she said breathlessly. "This wound isn't anything—really it isn't! You mustn't. . . I mean it can wait until we reach the ranch. Lona will look after it for me."

McCuen drew a keen-bladed stock knife, caught hold of the reddened sleeve at the shoulder seam and ripped the cloth down to the cuff. He winced at sight of the deep gash across the soft white flesh of the arm.

"Damn that bunch, they'll pay for this," he snarled. Then, in a soft voice, "Hurt much?"

"Yes," she said quietly.

Kip turned to his horse, yanked the bedroll from behind the saddle. He opened it, looked ruefully at a bullet punctured coffee pot and dented skillet. From a thin warbag he took a white shirt, began tearing it into strips. He made a thick compress of one piece. He turned back to the girl to discover that she was using her silk neckerchief to wipe crimson from her arm.

"Don't bother about that," he advised. "The thing to do now is get that bleeding stopped. Steady, now. This may hurt a bit, but it will do the trick."

He put the compress in place, bound it with strips of the white silk shirt. His movements were swift and deft, and the thing was done within a few moments. He next made a sling from a piece of the shirt, looped it about Carolyn's neck, then carefully lifted the wounded arm into the sling.

Although he worked swiftly, he was aware of a tenseness about her, and knew that she had been looking back down the ravine constantly. When he cradled her arm in the sling she looked up into his face, her eyes grave.

"Thank you," she said simply. "That does feel much better. But we'll have to get under way. Haze Pollard will not be too long in discovering our ruse."

"Ruse? What ruse, Miss Carolyn?"

She smiled, a twinkle in her eyes. "A few moments ago I was a little goose, or something like that," she reminded him. "Now you've gone formal again. We've known each other less than half a day, I'll admit. But after what we've been through I think we could drop the formality of Miss and Mister and simply call each other by name, don't you?"

"Of course, Mi—I mean Carolyn," he smiled. "But you didn't answer my question. What ruse were you talkin' about?"

"This is Uncle Jim's horse pasture we're in, Kip. I led the way south after we left the corral, across the meadow as you recall."

"Yes, and I wanted to head straight east for this ravine," he scowled. "If we had, that bullet would not have cut your arm."

"I headed south, Kip, because there is a gate in the south fence of this pasture. Haze Pollard will gather a bunch of his men and ride for that south gate, naturally thinking that we have headed there in order to get out of this horse trap."

"Say, that was some damned good head-work, even if it did almost get you killed," Kip admitted. "By the time Pollard figures out what happened, we can be out of here, I take it. There's another gate up here some place?"

"There's no gate up here," Carolyn answered. "But I brought wire cutters. We're to cut the fence by a lightning-blasted tree up on the ridge. Uncle Jim knows where to find the break, and will fix it this afternoon."

McCuen nodded and turned to roll his blankets once more. He discarded the ruined coffee pot and skillet, then lashed the roll behind the saddle. He helped Carolyn into her saddle and let her take the lead until they worked up the long slope to a tree that had been torn by lightning. McCuen took the wire cutters from the girl's saddle pocket, snipped the four stout

POWDERSMOKE PEACE

wires and carefully rolled the barb-armed lengths out of the way. Then they were mounted again, and McCuen turned to Carolyn for guidance.

"Lead out," he said. "And with that arm of yours, I'd suggest the shortest way to your ranch."

"You're not coming to the Seven K with me, Kip," Carolyn said slowly.

He looked at her, amazement and wonder in his eyes. Her cheeks took on color, but her eyes did not fall under his steady regard.

"You're tellin' me I'm not welcome to ride home with you?" he asked finally.

"It isn't that," she said, looking down. "It's simply that there'll be more trouble if you do ride to the ranch with me."

"More trouble!" he snorted. "I reckon if that's all that's worryin' you—"

"No, Kip. No, don't come with me. Ride on! Get out of this country before you are killed."

"I ran from one batch of trouble," he answered coldly. "Down yonder in that corral, a while ago, Carolyn, I had a lot of luck. It couldn't have been anything but luck that brought me through that gun trap alive. But I did have luck, and I figure to bank on that luck a while yet. I'm not runnin' any more."

She looked up at him then, and there was that shadow of stark dread in her eyes again. McCuen felt a keen pang of pity that became something deeper as he regarded her. She was so small, so white and sick looking at the moment. And she was in trouble—trouble that struck deeply.

He wanted to reach out to her, take her in his arms and hold her close to him. He wanted to reassure her, tell her that whatever her troubles were she was to forget them, let him shoulder the burden of them. But he did not reach out his arms to her. Nor did he speak the things that were in his mind. Carolyn was looking at

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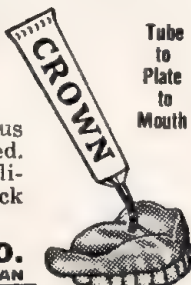
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him in a strange manner, and he sat there, uncertain, undecided.

He saw her full red lips tremble, saw the gleam of unshed tears burn brightly in her eyes. Then her voice lashed out.

"You're not coming to the Seven K," she cried. "I tried to be decent about it, but your conceit will not permit that. If you want the truth, Kip McCuen, you're not welcome at the ranch."

Before the astounded Kip could think of a reply, Carolyn had spun the mettlesome sorrel and was flashing away along the ridge.

Chapter VI

ZUNI BASIN RANCH

CAROLYN TURNER was out of sight before Kip McCuen gathered his wits enough to begin even guessing at an answer. His face reddened when he recalled what she had said about his egotism. He resented that. He knew that he had done or said nothing that would have branded him overly egotistical.

He built and lighted a cigarette, eyes puckered as he tried to ferret out the answer to Carolyn's scorn. He had reduced the cigarette to a flat stub before he had the answer to her actions. He sat up with a jerk, spat out the dead cigarette with an explosive sound.

"She was afraid for me to go to that ranch of hers!" He said it aloud, then sat staring up along the timbered ridge, his mind working diligently. And the more he considered that explanation, the more logical it seemed.

Why Carolyn should have been afraid for him to go to the ranch he had not the faintest idea. Whom or what she feared was a complete mystery. McCuen's thin brows drew together in a scowl. He did not like mysteries—especially this one which involved an already harassed girl.

He brought his glance to the ground, saw the trim, clear prints of Carolyn's sorrel. McCuen touched his dun's ribs with dull rowels, started riding up the ridge, following the clear sign left by the sorrel's hoofs.

"Maybe I'm not welcome at the Seven K," he mused, "but I've got a hunch Carolyn Turner didn't exactly mean what she said. Anyway, it won't hurt to find out."

He followed the sorrel's prints up the ridge and onto a hanging mesa that was open and grassy. Beyond the mesa reared tall bluffs, their snaggly crowns shoved high above the timber. The sorrel had angled across the steeply slanted mesa at a swift pace, and McCuen frowned when he realized that the girl had ridden up toward those towering cliffs.

He looked off over tumbled ridges and twisting, dark canyons in all directions, realizing suddenly that this mesa was higher than he had at first thought. But he gave only fleeting glances to the wild expanse of hills and canyons and fanged peaks which surrounded him. His eyes were studying the sorrel's spoor more intently now as he reached the up-side of the mesa. Before him was a wall of brush and boulders, reaching steeply up and up until they met the base of those frowning bluffs.

"What the hell made her tackle any such country as this?" he muttered.

He was thinking of Carolyn Turner's wounded arm, and realizing that she had no business riding into such rough country. Then another thought came, puzzling McCuen, adding to the mystery of the girl's behavior. Had she chosen these boulder-fanged, brush-matted slopes in the hope she could hide her trail?

McCuen swore under his breath, and a glint of angry determination sparkled in his eyes. He dismounted, looped the dun's reins on the saddlehorn and went into the brush and rocks on foot, letting the horse follow at his heels.

It took him half an hour to work his way through the thickets and boulders to the more open ground along the base of the bluffs. His face and hands were scratched, his shirt had been badly snagged and his breath came in painful gasps when he finally got into the open. But not once had he lost the sorrel's tracks, and despite his discomfort a smile curled his lips as he finally left the brush. His dun horse crashed through behind him, stood nudging his shoulder.

Kip mounted to the saddle, his sharp eyes easily tracing the course Carolyn Turner had taken along the base of the bluffs. The sign led into a gash-thin opening in the cliff after half a mile. McCuen chuckled aloud, turned his dun into the narrow slot.

"That young lady sure tried to fog her sign," he muttered, his mouth twisting in a grin.

The slot widened after a few rods, and McCuen saw a blue expanse beyond, which gave him a hint of what lay there before he actually saw it. When he rode to the mouth of the pass he reined in, sat staring out and down for long minutes, his eyes beginning to shine with genuine admiration.

Below him lay a great basin, hemmed in on all sides by just such cliffs as he had come through. Far out in the center of the basin he saw a cluster of buildings. There were countless green meadows, separated by dark slashes of timber that followed streams down from the tall but gentle slopes. A major stream, with its broad swath of timber, marched the entire length of the basin.

He recalled old Jim Orr saying that Zuni Basin was Carolyn's Seven K range. At the time, Zuni Basin had meant nothing to McCuen. But he knew now that this must be Zuni Basin, and practical range man that he was, he saw how such a piece of grass could cause its owner trouble. No cowman could have looked upon Zuni

Basin without wanting it. Kip McCuen found himself wishing that he owned that marvelous green bowl.

"No wonder the Pollards are tryin' to squeeze Carolyn Turner out of here," he mused. "Range wars have been fought over a damned sight less valuable land than this basin."

HE SHOOK himself, brought his mind and eye back to the business of following Carolyn's sorrel. The prints were there, clear-cut where the stone floor of the narrow pass gave way to springy soil. McCuen's face was grave as he rode along the gentle slope, glancing out and down occasionally at the buildings far beyond, and letting his eye sweep the rich expanse of sheltered range. Up along the high benches, piñon and cedar grew abundantly. But down in the basin there were great oaks, with mountain ash and sycamore along the streambeds.

McCuen was half way down the long slope when he gave up following the hoof marks of Carolyn's sorrel. Obviously the girl had headed for the ranch buildings out there in the basin, and Kip put his dun at a lope.

He dropped down to the fertile bosom of the basin, his practical eye missing no detail of its rich grass, sheltered pockets and side canyons, and abundance of water. Then his eyes were on the buildings, and as the dun carried him briskly toward them he studied the great, sprawling log ranch-house.

He saw gravelled walkways that were bordered with bright flowers, and a curving, tree-bordered lane that led past the house to barns and corrals beyond. Behind the house stretched a well-kept fruit orchard, with a vegetable garden in the near foreground.

There was a long, comfortable-looking bunkhouse beside the orchard fence, and McCuen knew a strange sense of happiness as he reined in before the yardgate, to

stand looking over the place. But he was soon moving along the gravelled walk, approaching the deep, shaded front porch. He was walking up the sandstone steps which fronted the porch when he heard angry voices from within. McCuen stopped, for one of those voices belonged to Carolyn Turner.

"You've got to listen this time, Ed," the girl was saying sharply.

"Cool down, sis," came an almost indolent reply. "Quit sputterin' like a wet hen and tell me what happened."

"But I have told you," Carolyn cried. "I've told you the whole thing. Aren't you interested at all? Doesn't it matter that your fine friends, Dan and Haze Pollard, tried to murder me?"

"Aw," the indolent voice came again, "your arm is hurt, I can see that. But Haze and Dan wouldn't shoot at you."

"Ed, for heaven's sake, can't you understand?" Carolyn almost sobbed the words. "I've tried to make you see that the Pollards have been fooling you, lying to you. Today they were in town, and had the cattle buyer we wanted to see cornered in a bar. I tried to get to the cattle buyer, and Dan Pollard caught me, started making fun of me on the street. I quirted him, but it did no good. He—he—"

"Dan wouldn't really hurt you, Carolyn," Ed cut in smoothly. "He's not exactly polished, I know. But his horseplay is harmless enough. If you had any sense, you'd marry Dan Pollard."

"Dan Pollard would have kissed me right there on the street, with half the town looking on, if Kip McCuen hadn't stopped him," Carolyn cried shrilly. "Quit swilling that stuff and listen to me."

"Calm down, dear," a gentle voice said. "How am I to bandage your arm if you keep jumping so? And you, Ed, don't annoy Carolyn just now."

"So Dan aimed to kiss you publicly because you quirted him," Ed chuckled. "But

(Continued on page 133)

CLARK STOCKING — ROAD AGENT NEMESIS

An unsung legend of the West, shotgun guard Clark Stocking's life was a long trail that twisted endlessly among Boothill's unmarked wooden crosses. For \$150 a month, he was heaven's guardian angel to stagecoach travelers—and the road agents' guide to Hell!

By BRETT AUSTIN

IT WAS mid-afternoon of a scorching, dusty July day. The year was 1852.

The Red Bluff stage carried a bullock box filled with California gold. Three men—the driver, a deputy sheriff and the shotgun guard—sat on the stage's box. Inside the creaking coach were an old

Negress and five men. One of these passengers was Clark Stocking, a tall, gangling, awkward kid of about twenty years of age.

The stage had been held up only a week previously. Now, with two armed men on the box, the gold was considered safe.

True to form, when the stage entered the brush country, two bandits tackled it.



But was it? The passengers weren't sure.

As the foam-flecked, sweating horses toiled up a long grade, when the steepness of that grade had slowed the weary brutes to a walk, a masked man astraddle a mule rode from the brush beside the dusty road. The man held a double-barreled shotgun, the black bores of which covered the men on the box. The driver hauled in his ribbons and tied the lines short.

The masked man said, "This is a stick-up, gents! Keep your seats! Keep your hands away from guns! Be nice, an' nobody'll be hurt!"

Bill Dobson was shotgun guard. A sturdy, fearless man, his boast was that he would never lose his gold shipments, come hell or high-water. He drew his body erect and his shotgun began yammering.

"Shoot an' be hanged!" he hollered.

His lead caught the bandit in the belly. The man slumped over the neck of his mule and, as he died, pulled the trigger of his own weapon. The slugs ripped through the coach and killed the old Negress instantly.

Five masked men walked out of the brush, their guns speaking. The stage horses reared and fought the lines, but the tightly tied lines managed to hold. The deputy sheriff and the driver, both of whom had boasted of their bravery, dropped into the road and beat a hurried retreat, their guns unfired. That left Dobson alone. One man against five, he stood there. His shotgun empty, he had pulled out his Colts and was blazing away.

Meanwhile, bedlam held sway inside the coach. Caught in the mad rush of men, Clark Stocking did little until the frightened passengers had followed the yellow-bellied deputy sheriff and driver into the brush. Then, his .45 palmed, Stocking went around the wheel of the coach and immediately exploded into action.

He killed one man instantly, wounded another. Dobson, seeing an ally, bore down even harder with his sixguns. When the

fight was over, most of the would-be bandits were either dead or in very bad shape.

Dobson spat drily, wiped his sweaty forehead with the back of a sleeve, looked down admiringly at youthful Clark Stocking and said, "You oughta take up this business, youngster."

Clark Stocking took the tough shotgun guard's advice.

Ten years later he rode shotgun on the stage running from Green River, Wyoming, north to the gold camp of South Pass.

The Green River-South Pass trail was dangerous territory. Several shotgun guards and drivers, to say nothing of a number of innocent stage passengers, had been killed along this winding thoroughfare. And, true to form, when the stage entered the brush country, two bandits tackled it.

A tall man grabbed the reins of the lead team and jerked the horses to a halt. A short hombre ordered, "Hands up!" and fired a warning shot even as he gave the command. The slug buried itself in the driver's shoulder.

Stocking launched himself from the box, firing as he dove. His bullet killed the outlaw, and Clark Stocking, unable to stem his wild dive, landed on top of the dead road agent.

CLARK STOCKING did not get to his feet. Instead he lay there, his gun up and steady, watching the legs of the second man, who stood panic-stricken, by the lead team. Soon the tall man, unable to see Stocking lying on the opposite side of the stage, bolted in fright. Stocking promptly killed him in his stride.

The frightened horses reared and plunged. The driver, clutching his wounded shoulder, could not hold the terrified brutes, and the stage rocked away, leaving Clark Stocking and two dead road agents stranded on the trail.

Later Clark Stocking practically ignored

details of the double killing, but he registered a hell of a beef because he had been forced to walk all the way into South Pass.

Clark Stocking, a quiet, slow-speaking man, rode shotgun over many a dangerous road, and in a short time became a veteran.

In 1878 Stocking worked between Deadwood and Laramie. Gold had been discovered in the Black Hills, and miners from California, Idaho and Montana began arriving in a steady stream. Following the miners, came road agents who had worked the diggings between Mexico and Canada—men determined to get rich quick—or die!

The coach was filled with passengers. The driver and two shotgun guards—Boone May and Stocking—rode the box. At Lance Creek, Stocking and May, realizing that dangerous territory lay ahead, dropped off the coach and obtained saddle horses. Mounted, they rode some distance behind the coach.

Farther on, the stage road twisted into a brush-filled coulee. There a masked man, a Colt in his right hand, popped out of the brush. He grabbed the bridles of the lead horses, pulled them to a halt, then fired a warning shot over the driver's head.

"Up with 'em!" he ordered.

Six other bandits, all masked and armed, stepped into the road. The driver, knowing better than to reach for his gun, raised his hands. The passengers sat in a hushed, frightened silence.

May and Stocking, rounding a bend about a hundred yards behind the stage unseen by the bandits, spurred their broncs into the brush. There they dismounted. Moving silently forward, they came opposite the stage. Still unnoticed by the road-agents, they crouched there about ten feet apart. Stocking's voice suddenly boomed across the coulee. "Drive on, Gene," he ordered the driver.

The bandits turned and stared into the brush. They wondered just who was speak-

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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

ing. The driver, puzzled, and fearing for his life, sat there, doing nothing.

"Drive on, damn it," Boone May snarled. "Get those passengers outta here!"

There was a quality in Boone May's voice that made the driver snap his lash suddenly. The stage lurched ahead, bullets from the amazed and wildly-shooting bandits following it.

With the stage out of danger, Boone May and Clark Stocking stepped from the brush—and powdersmoke erupted! When it was all over, four road agents were dead and three stood disarmed, their hands high. Boone May and Clark Stocking were uninjured.

The victors forced their captives to tie their dead comrades over saddles and jog along. When the quick-shooting pair arrived in town, neither would say much about the holdup, other than to soundly curse the driver for not going ahead when Clark Stocking had ordered him to.

Clark Stocking, his sawed-off shotgun across his knees, his .45s pouched and ready, rode on the boxes of many more stages, waging war against road agents. And the bandits of those northern gold fields were reckless and daring, men who pinned their lives and futures upon well-schemed attempts to "get off with the bul- lion." Many times Clark Stocking wrote Western history with a pencil of flame and lead.

And always, in his quiet-mannered way, he said little about his exploits, making his actions his statements in emergencies. In that day of sudden and violent death, he attributed his success as a stage guard to the simple fact that he generally shot a split-second sooner than did the enemy.

And for his bravery, for his ability to face death calmly and to deal it out to the lawless, Clark Stocking received from his employers the meager sum of \$150 a month!

(Continued from page 128)

why all the fuss? I imagine you've been kissed before, my sly minx."

Kip McCuen knew that a horse thundered up to the gate behind him, and that someone shouted his name. But that did not matter to him at the moment. He had the odd sensation that he saw the doorway before him through a red fog.

His long legs shot him across the porch, into the doorway. He knew that Carolyn Turner leaped up from a sofa. McCuen knew, too, that a motherly-looking woman with white hair and a kindly, gentle face got hastily up from beside the couch. But he did not look at the white-haired woman, nor at the amazed Carolyn.

McCuen's blazing eyes were riveted on a handsome young fellow who sat hunched in a deep chair, one leg draped over the chair's broad arm. The youth's face was flushed, his gray eyes too bright as he looked up over the rim of a tall glass he held. McCuen's legs scissored again, and he was beside the chair.

"Kip!" Carolyn's voice was a scream. "For heaven's sake, wait!"

Kip McCuen heard, but the words had no effect.

The handsome youngster was beginning to straighten up, fine brows lumping in a scowl. "Look here, my bucko!" he began. "Bargin' in here like this—"

The insolent voice was like an explosion in McCuen's brain. His left hand shot out and down, grasped the front of a fawn-colored shirt that would have cost an ordinary cowpoke half a month's wages. McCuen yanked, and the husky youth came lurching up, a startled look in his eyes.

The fawn-colored shirt split from collar to belt line. McCuen plucked the tall glass from the young fellow's hand, flung the contents of it full into the handsome face. Then McCuen released his hold on the ruined shirt and smashed a back-hand blow to the boy's face. The youngster went spinning, and fell.

McCuen carefully put the tall glass beside a decanter and syphon, then strode to where the husky young fellow was getting to his feet. Kip's open palm cracked like a pistol shot against the man's cheek. The youth tried to draw his head down between brawny shoulders. But McCuen gave him no chance. He walked in close and his open hands flashed in swift, ringing blows that turned the handsome face almost purple. When the youngster tried to waver, give ground, McCuen caught him, shook him savagely.

"I happened to hear what you said to Carolyn, sprout." He spoke for the first time, and his voice was strangely calm.

The dazed youngster blinked at him, more in amazement, McCuen saw, than in anger.

"You'll apologize to Carolyn for that remark, or by God I'll slap you ragged!"

Ed's eyes suddenly flamed, his big shoulders bunched. "Who the Hell do you think you're talkin' to?"

He swung a fist, but McCuen pressed in, took the steam out of the blow. Even so he felt his ribs give, and knew that, once started, this youngster would be no easy man to handle.

"I think I'm talkin' to the rottenest brother I ever ran across," McCuen said coldly. "At least, what I heard as I came up on the porch led me to think you're Carolyn's brother."

McCuen was aware of a commotion behind him, but could not look around. Ed Turner was furious, and McCuen took two blows that rocked him on his feet before his slashing palms drove Ed back, made him cover his face with his arms.

"You ready to apologize to your sister, kid, or do I work on you a while longer?"

Turner backed up, panting, uneasiness mingling with rage in his swollen eyes.

"What I say to my own sister is none of your damned business," Turner cried. "She's a—"

"She's a fine girl, with more sense, more

pluck and more good qualities than a swelled-up young toad like you could ever hope to have," McCuen cut in coldly. "You'll apologize or—"

McCuen got no further. Carolyn tore past him, threw her arms around Ed Turner and stood sobbing, brushing at his bruised face with tender fingers. McCuen became aware of other people moving about him then. The gray-haired woman stopped beside him, looked up at him in a solemn way that did not quite hide a twinkle deep in her kindly eyes. Then old Jim Orr was at McCuen's elbow, leathery face wearing a huge grin.

Carolyn turned suddenly and Kip McCuen felt a cold spot form in the pit of his stomach. The coldness spread through him as he looked into the girl's tear-wet eyes and furiously angry face.

"Kip McCuen," she cried thinly, "how dare you do such a thing as this to Ed. Get out of here. Go back where your kind belongs."

Chapter VII

DISTURBING NEWS

OLD JIM ORR overtook Kip McCuen at the ranchyard gate. White to the lips, McCuen had stalked from the house and down the gravelled walk, sick with a feeling of defeat utterly foreign to him. Orr called to him as he was about to mount.

"Hold on, son," the oldster said. "Carolyn said some pretty pointed things, I know. But you made the big mistake of crossin' that precious brother of hers. McCuen, you give that boy what he's needed ever since he was knee-high to a gopher."

McCuen shook off the somberness that had settled over him. He forced a grin, trying to appear nonchalant.

"Hell, Orr, I got what was comin' to me," he declared. "I had no call to slap that kid around like I did."

"Like sin you didn't. Lona Dale, the gray-haired woman in there, told me what it was all about. Lona, she raised them two kids since their mammy died ten years back. And since their daddy, Harp Turner, passed on four years ago, Lona has been the only one to see that they had a good home."

"Which still doesn't say why I had a right to wallop that cocky kid," McCuen grunted.

"Ed Turner has been spoiled from the cradle up," Orr snorted. "Harp Turner was one of them hard-shelled fellers who figgered a woman's job was to rock a cradle and cook a man's vittels. Oh, he wasn't ornery to his wife or to Carolyn. I don't mean it that way. Harp just looked on women folks as somethin' necessary to make a man's life more livable. He wanted a son when Carolyn was born. The old geezer was plumb sulky for days because his first child was a girl."

Orr broke off, squinted toward the house a moment, then continued.

"When Ed was born, old Harp Turner was shore a struttin' peacock from then on," he said. "And there was nothin' under the sun too good for that boy. Ed's mammy was just as bad, though I guess she favored the boy simply to keep Harp happy. Carolyn, bein' three years older, set in to spoilin' Ed, too. So has Lona Dale pampered him, though I know Lona thinks as much of Carolyn as she does of Ed."

"It wouldn't take much of an eye to see that Ed has had a lot of fuss made over him," McCuen shrugged. "Underneath, he's probably a good kid, if he could only throw off the pettin' and spoilin' long enough to be himself."

"That's just what I was gettin' at," Orr nodded gravely. "For years, I've told Lona and Carolyn that a good, sound lickin' would do Ed more good than all the cod-dlin' in the world could. And by thunder I was there to see him get that lickin'. I got inside before you started on him."

POWDERSMOKE PEACE

"I'm not proud of it," Kip grumbled. "On the other hand, I'm not sorry. Maybe the kid learned a thing or two, anyhow."

"That's the first time anybody ever laid ungentle hands on that young buck," Orr chuckled. "And damned if Ed didn't try to fight back. I tell you, there's good in that boy. If Carolyn and Lona would only quit hand-feeding him and let him alone he'd be all right. Better yet, Ed ought to cut loose from the apron strings that have always held him and hit out on his own hook for a year or two. He'd come back a different sort, I'd bet."

"Likely he'd get some of the soft edges trimmed off," McCuen said dryly. "How old is he, about twenty?"

Orr nodded. "Goin' on twenty-one. But I didn't come out here to talk about Ed Turner. I come out to see how bad Carolyn was hurt, and to let her know that the lid blowed plumb off hell after you two left town today."

"What happened?"

"When Tigg Wayland and Bandy Simmons hopped up on the corral fence and started shootin' at you and Carolyn with rifles, there was hell to pay," Orr reported. "People who have been afraid to even whisper around the Pollards reared right up and yelled at Haze to stop them two gunmen of his from throwin' rifle lead toward Carolyn. And when we all seen her nearly fall from the saddle, and knowed she was hit, a mob rushed Tigg Wayland and Bandy Simmons."

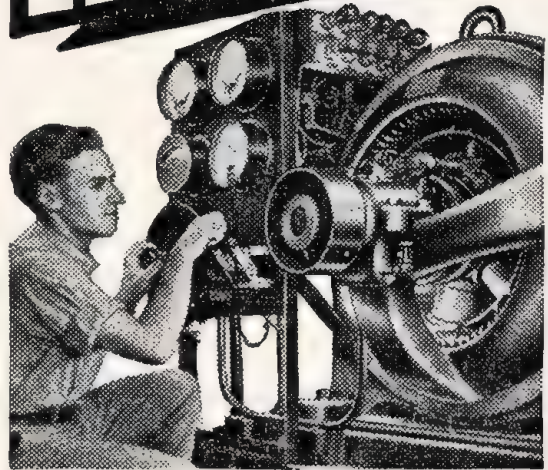
"I threw long distance shots at them two riflemen," McCuen recalled. "One of 'em fell, like I had accidentally scored a hit."

"You did score a hit," Orr explained. "One of your slugs took Tigg Wayland in the kneecap and knocked him off the fence."

"So a mob put a stop to that rifle fire," McCuen grunted. "What did Haze Pollard think about that?"

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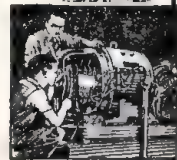
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"Haze was too busy runnin', to think of anything but his own hide. You see, son, that mob of townsmen and cowboys wasn't bluffin'. They hung Tigg Wayland and Bandy Simmons to the beam in my driveway door."

"THE hell! Things did liven up, didn't they?"

"More than you think," Orr said gravely. "On top of the hangin', your own shootin' turned out to be a bull's eye."

"My shootin' didn't amount to a whole lot, Orr. Fact is, I was plenty lucky to get out of that corral alive. I reckon I done Nat Graw in, for he didn't move after he fell. But Dan Pollard got up and walked away, and I don't think I even touched Haze with lead."

"Your slug only scraped Nat Graw's skull. Outside of a headache and a temper that'd singe the bristle off the devil's tail, there was nothin' wrong with Graw. You didn't touch Haze Pollard, as you figgered. But you killed Dan Pollard."

"Why," McCuen snorted, "I saw Dan Pollard get up and walk out of the corral. He was holdin' his side, like maybe my lead had blistered him some. But he wasn't hurt much."

"That's what everybody thought, Dan included," Orr said grimly. "He got up, walked down the street to the Silver Moon Saloon. Dan ordered a drink, and was tellin' Tod Leech, the Silver Moon owner, about the fight at the corral. But all of a sudden Dan dropped his glass, pitched over on his face, and was stone dead. Your slug had sliced his liver."

"Dan and his brother Haze, along with that shrivelled up Grew hellion, tried to work a slick gun trick on me, with the odds already three to one in their favor," McCuen said slowly. "Still, I'm sorry it had to be like this. I'm sorry I had to kill a man."

"Don't waste no sympathy," the oldster

barked. "Dan Pollard has been over-due in hell since the day he was born. So has Haze. All I'm sorry about is that you missed Haze. He's gone plumb, ravin' crazy. He's gatherin' his gunmen from the Rollin' R. He's sent riders foggin' for the Rio Seco country you left, to fetch Morg Kessler and that pool bunch."

"So?" McCuen mused thinly. "Brother Haze aims to set all his curly wolves on me, eh?"

"Haze never mentioned your name." Orr's voice was throaty, his face strained.

"Then why the devil would he gather his wolf pack if he didn't aim to settle with me for what happened to Dan?"

Orr glanced at the house again, then turned troubled eyes on McCuen. "Haze is fetchin' his gun-slingers here. He says if it hadn't been for Carolyn standin' out against him the way she has, this thing would never happened to Dan. He'll—Lordy, I hate to think what that overfed son will do when he rides in here, two or three days from now, with his whole outfit."

"How many riders on this ranch?" McCuen asked crisply.

"Eight," Orr answered dully. "Haze Pollard will have anyway twenty hand-picked gun-slingers with him when he comes. Maybe more than that. This place is doomed, and so is Carolyn."

"How about Ed Turner?" McCuen clipped. "Could he stop Haze?"

"Not a damned thing. The Pollards have pulled the wool over Ed's eyes, made him think Carolyn was imaginin' a lot of things and all that. You see, son, the whole thing started when Haze and Dan Pollard talked Ed Turner into consolidatin' the Pollard Rollin' R and the Turner Seven K ranches into one whoppin' big outfit. Ed, he went right ahead and cooked up the whole thing with them Pollards, never botherin' to even mention it to Carolyn until he sauntered around and told her to sign the papers."

"Carolyn balked?" McCuen probed.

"I'll tell a man she balked. Ed not bein' of age made whatever papers he had signed worthless, without Carolyn's name on 'em. Ed got sore as the devil at her, and the Pollards have never let up on the girl. But they've played up to Ed, figgerin', I reckon, that he'd come of age and sign up his part of the ranch with them."

"If I'd known this I think I'd have slapped that fool's ears a few extra taps," McCuen said grimly. "But what about Haze Pollard? He's got to be stopped."

"Sure, he's got to be stopped. But how? Son, I'm scared. The mob that hung two of Pollard's men for shootin' at Carolyn scattered from hell to breakfast when word got out that Dan was dead and that Haze had started gatherin' his entire force. If I can round up enough men to ride out here and guard the place, maybe we can stop Haze. But it'll take time to find men with sand enough to fight. And time's what I'm short on."

Kip McCuen's face had gone wooden, his eyes hardened by somber thinking. "I couldn't do much good here, even if Carolyn Turner would let me stay," he said.

"Come back tomorrow some time," Orr said hastily. "Carolyn will cool down, and be plenty sorry for the way she talked. Unless I misjudged the way you looked at her today, you sorta like that girl. That right?"

McCuen was gazing off toward the slopes beyond the meadows. "I could get mighty fond of that young lady, Orr," he said quietly. "Fact is, I reckon I am fond of her already."

"Then you'll come back tomorrow!" the oldster said jubilantly. "With you here I'll feel a lot better. Now if we can find a few more men, maybe we can hand Haze Pollard a surprise when he fetches his killers down on us."

"Cut off a snake's head, and the thing will keep right on wigglin'," McCuen said slowly. "But with the head gone, that snake is right harmless."

He flipped his dun's reins up, swung into the saddle. He rode away then, leaving a puzzled old man to stare after him.

Chapter VIII

SMOKY TRAIL'S END

DUSK was falling when Kip McCuen came to the fence he had cut that day. At a water hole, just below the cut fence, he rested until night had fully come, then rode on, following the same wooded ravine up which he and Carolyn had raced.

McCuen's every sense was alert when he rode into the outskirts of the town and circled cautiously to the barn. A gangly youngster met him at the gate, took the dun and led the horse away, whistling cheerfully, blissfully unaware of McCuen's identity.

Kip sauntered lazily down the street, his movements casual enough, but his eyes alert. There were saddled horses at most of the hitchracks, and he heard the squeal of fiddles, the coarse laughter of men mingling with the tittering of dancehall girls as he passed a dimly lighted saloon. He saw the Silver Moon, and slowed his pace, eyes scanning the dark mass of restless horses at the long hitchrack. He walked past the batwing doors, his eyes flicking the throng of men who milled before the bar. He recognized no one, and walked on.

He found the atmosphere of the cowtown altogether natural, and was pleased. There was no subdued feel of pending trouble, no muted talk from men who passed in and out of doorways. And by this McCuen knew that Haze Pollard was waiting until those other gunmen came up from the Rio Seco to swell his fighting power.

He sighed deeply, made somber by the thing which lay in his mind as he walked on and on along the street. He shadowed the Silver Moon and the town's other two

saloons for nearly two hours without sighting big Haze Pollard or Nat Graw.

A restlessness seized him and he turned finally toward the grim little stone building that was combination marshal's office and town jail. In passing the place earlier, McCuen had seen Marshal Ben Kell slumped at a rickety desk. Kell was still there now, and McCuen stood just outside the door, studying the gaunt lawman.

Kell looked pale in the glow of the room's single lamp, and his eyes were fixed unseeingly on the wall beyond the desk. McCuen's lips tightened and his eyes narrowed against the lamp's glow as he stepped up into the doorway.

Kell started nervously, ferret eyes whipping to the doorway. The marshal's thin mouth opened, his body started up in a jerky motion. But McCuen was already inside, and had moved sidewise until his back was against solid stone wall.

"Keep your seat, Kell," he advised.

KELL settled back in the chair, laced bony hands together on the desk before him, and studied McCuen out of unwinking eyes.

"You want me, Kell?" McCuen asked. "You want to arrest me for what happened in town today?"

"Hell, no, I don't want you!" Kell rasped. "McCuen, there was considerable doin' after you and the Turner girl left town today. A bunch of fellers called around and—and put me right about that trouble you had. No court would convict you."

"The bunch you mention was the same bunch that hung two of Pollard's other hired men," McCuen said.

Kell shuddered, and sticky moisture oozed from the pores along his tall forehead. "All right, the mob did tell me off," he wheezed. "And I'm not holdin' it against any one of them boys, either."

"No?" McCuen droned.

"No!" Kell blatted. "I'm no angel, Mc-

POWDERSMOKE PEACE

Cuen. On top of that, I'm beholdin' to Haze Pollard. But I'm no woman killer. Them two fools who got strung up had no business shootin' at Carolyn Turner. Nor did Haze. Haze is lucky he didn't get what Tigg Wayland and Bandy Simmons got."

"You shot at the girl and me too," McCuen reminded him.

Kell cursed, jerked a twitching hand across his face. "I never turned loose a slug that would go within yards of either one of you," he growled. "I was up on the corral fence with Haze, sure. And I would have knocked you over if I'd had the chance. But I couldn't shoot at you without runnin' the risk of hittin' the girl."

"You had to shoot so's Haze Pollard wouldn't give you hell," McCuen decided. "You threw your lead wide of the girl and me. But the mob didn't know that."

"No, they didn't," Kell groaned. "Them fools come within an inch of hangin' me to the barn beam."

"Maybe they will yet," McCuen drawled.

Kell stiffened, the color running out of his thin cheeks as he stared at the tall man. "Wh-what do you mean, McCuen?"

"I mean this thing ain't over yet, Kell. You know that. You know Haze Pollard is gatherin' his gun-slammers and aimin' to wipe out the Seven K. And if you've got the brains God gave a goose, you'll realize that every man known to be hooked up with Pollard will be hunted down after that raid."

Kell was shuddering, sick fear in his twitching face. "Sure I know all that, McCuen," he groaned. "I ain't been able to think of anything else since Haze started callin' his gun clan together. I've tried to talk to the fool, tried to show him that raidin' the Seven K, like he aims to, will fetch the sheriff in here with an army of possemen and a bale of warrants. Maybe—maybe I can talk to Haze tomorrow,

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20x4.75-19	2.45	1.25	32x4.40-21	2.95	1.25	34x4.40-21	3.45
20x4.75-20	2.50	1.25	32x4.40-21	2.95	1.25	34x4.40-21	3.45
20x5.00-19	2.55	1.25	32x4.40-21	2.95	1.25	34x4.40-21	3.45
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20x5.00-98	2.55	1.25	32x4.40-21	2.95	1.25	34x4.40-21	3.45
20x5.00-99	2.55	1.25	32x4.40-21	2.95	1.25	34x4.40-21	3.45
20x5.00-100	2.55	1.25	32x4.40-21	2.95	1.25	34x4.40-21	3.45

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20x4.60-20	2.35	1.02	32x4.40-21	2.95	1.25	34x4.40-21	3.45
20x4.60-21	2.40	1.02	32x4.40-21	2.95	1.25	34x4.40-21	3.45
20x4.75-19	2.45	1.25	32x4.40-21	2.95	1.25	34x4.40-21	3.45
20x4.75-20	2.50	1.25	32x4.40-21	2.95	1.25	34x4.40-21	3.45
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20x5.00-22	2.55	1.25	32x4.40-21	2.95	1.25	34x4.40-21	3.45
20x5.00-23	2.55	1.25	32x4.40-21	2.95	1.25	34x4.40-21	3.45
20x5.00-24	2.55	1.25	32x4.40-21	2.95	1.25	34x4.40-21	3.45
20x5.00-25	2.55	1.25	32x4.40-21	2.95	1.25	34x4.40-21	3.45
20x5.00-26	2.55	1.25	32x4.40-21	2.95	1.25	34x4.40-21	3.45
20x5.00-27	2.55	1.25	32x4.40-21	2.95	1.25	34x4.40-21	3.45
20x5.00-28	2.55	1.25	32x4.40-21	2.95	1.25	34x4.40-21	3.45
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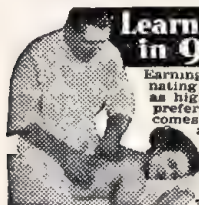
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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

after he's cooled off. If I can't—"

"You can't," McCuen cut in. "Tomorrow will be too late. Where is Haze Pollard?"

Kell scrubbed shaking hands over his moist face, cursing in an agony of dread.

"Haze is holed up at the Western Palace Hotel," he said dully. "He's drinkin' some, and gettin' uglier every minute. The devil might pull that raid tonight, not waitin' for his bunch from Rio Seco."

"You know Pollard's room number?"

The officer stared, wet his lips.

"Haze is in room nine," he snapped. "But if you've got any notions about goin' up there, get over 'em. Nat Graw, Cotton McFall and maybe others are in that room with Haze."

"Plumb bad, that bunch," McCuen said dryly.

"Too bad for anybody's good," Kell groaned. "But you go 'way and leave me be. I've got to figure some way of stoppin' Haze Pollard before he gets plumb out of hand. If you hadn't come nosin' around here, none of this would have happened."

The marshal was glaring as he finished, and McCuen left without a reply. He stepped out onto the street, moved along it at a swinging walk. He was fifty yards or better beyond the marshal's office and jail when riders came racing along the street in a tight group. McCuen could not tell how many of them there were, but the fact that they were riding bunched, and were suddenly reining in at Kell's office caused McCuen to glance around.

He saw the dim silhouette of figures going into the marshal's office, and was tempted to turn back, find out what was going on. But he finally shrugged, walked on along the street, his nerves tightening as he approached the hotel.

Dim figures were seated in chairs on the porch, and McCuen heard the drone of voices as men talked. He walked on across the porch, turned into the little lob-

by. A drummer was seated in a chair, reading a paper. Two grizzled fellows, who bore the stamp of cattlemen, were just coming down the stairs which led up from the lobby. One of the cattlemen tossed a key to the pudgy young clerk behind the desk, and McCuen stood back, waiting until the cowmen were gone.

"Want a room, mister?" the clerk inquired politely as he spun the dogeared register.

McCuen leaned closer. "Pollard still in his room?" he asked guardedly.

THE clerk looked startled, backed up from the counter. "I'm not at liberty to—" he began.

"Listen, youngster, I've got to see Haze and see him quick," McCuen said. "If he's in his room, I'll go on up."

"You're a friend of his?" the clerk demanded suspiciously.

"Call it whatever suits you," McCuen growled. "But quit stallin'. This is a matter of life and death."

"I see," the clerk nodded. "All right, Mr. Pollard is still in his room. He told me to refuse to answer any questions. But if this is important—"

"It is," McCuen cut in, and turned to find the drummer regarding him over the top of the paper.

Kip walked to the stairs, took them two at a time, yet he landed on the balls of his feet, making surprisingly little sound. His pulse was keyed to a brisk tempo as he walked down the hallway. The deep voice of Haze Pollard saved him the trouble of searching for number nine.

McCuen's hands flipped down, eased the guns in their holsters. Then he was at the door, sucking a deep breath into his lungs as he caught hold of the knob and turned it with patient care. The door swung easily to his touch, and McCuen stepped across the threshold, his rust-flecked eyes hard in the smoky light as he looked at the thunderstruck faces of three men.

Three men! McCuen's hard eyes sparkled with mounting hope. Three men—Haze Pollard, Nat Graw and a shaggy tow-head.

"McCuen!" Haze Pollard roared, and his vast bulk tightened, his broad face reddened with anger.

McCuen heeled the door shut behind him, felt for the key and turned it.

"What the hell!" Nat Graw squealed, and dropped a water tumbler that was half filled with amber liquid.

"So this is Kip McCuen, the bearcat from the Rio Seco," the shaggy tow-head said, and laughed coldly, his pale blue eyes appraising McCuen.

"Shut up, Cotton," Nat Graw snapped.

"I come here to make medicine with you, Pollard." McCuen's voice was flat, unhurried. "The kind of medicine we make depends on you. Whether Graw and this Cotton jigger mix into the affair or not is up to them."

Haze Pollard blinked, rolled hooded eyes right and left.

"You're not raidin' the Seven K, Pollard," McCuen said slowly.

Pollard lurched up off the chair he had been sitting on.

"Who the hell will stop us?" he roared.

"I'm stoppin' *you*," McCuen still spoke quietly. "A headless rattlesnake can't do anything worse than wiggle. And before I leave this room—"

Faintly, a burst of excited voices reached into the room. Someone was shouting, feet were pounding on the stairs. And suddenly out of that welter of confused sounds came a clear voice, calling Kip McCuen's name. It was the voice of Carolyn Turner, and hearing her threw McCuen off guard, caused him to glance back at the door.

As his head turned, the hoarse blast of a gun sprang at him from the room. The trip-hammer blow of a bullet struck his ribs, knocking him sidewise. There was no pain yet, only a numbness that reached

from his left side all through him. Yet his hands moved with a deadly precision as he reached for guns, brought them up. The room was a roaring place, for three sets of guns were spewing at him, sending lead feeling for his body as he rolled along the floor, his own guns bursting red blossoms into the flash of those other weapons.

McCuen heard a wild howl from somewhere in the fogged murk before him, and knew that he had scored a hit. A bullet cut across his forearm, but touched only lightly. He swung his guns and sent two shots into the flash of the other weapons, and saw the shaggy tow-head, Cotton, stumble out of a powder fog, bend at the knees, and fall down on his face.

Someone struck the room's door savagely, and McCuen heard the splintering of dry wood. A bullet struck him in the left elbow, and the gun was flipped from his nerveless fingers by the shock. But his right hand Colt spat evenly spaced shots into the corner from which that last burst of fire had come.

THE shock had left his bullet-torn flesh now, and McCuen's brain was reeling as he dropped the empty gun from his right hand, began feeling for the weapon that had fallen from his useless left hand. He was still groping dazedly for the gun when the wreckage of the door crashed in across his long legs.

"McCuen!" somebody shouted.

There was a lot of confusion, a lot of shouting and stamping about. McCuen knew that he was lifted up, for the red hell of gun wounds tore at him when he was moved. Someone talked to him, called his name. After that he was dimly aware of a strong medicinal odor, and his wounds were probed until the blazing agony of it brought a merciful stupor.

When he again became aware of what went on about him he felt certain that he had been out for only a moment. The noise was gone now, and he was glad of that.

So had the flaming agony left his wounded body. He opened his eyes to discover clean sunshine streaming in upon the white bed in which he lay.

"What the devil!" he muttered, and tried to sit up.

Sharp twinges of pain, and a small cool hand that touched his forehead put him back flat upon the sheets. Then McCuen's clearing gaze focused on Carolyn Turner, who sat beside his bed in a great, clean room he had never seen before. The girl's face was wan, and her lips trembled as she leaned above him.

"Kip?" she called softly. "You are conscious?"

"I hope so," he said after a moment. "I sure do hope I'm conscious, Carolyn. Havin' you here, actin' like maybe it mattered—You're cryin'!"

Carolyn Turner was crying softly, brokenly. She leaned down until her curly dark head rested on his shoulder and McCuen's good right arm held her there, while he tried desperately to think of something to say. But he could think of nothing, and lay stroking her hair, a happiness welling up within him that made his own throat tight and dry.

Carolyn straightened finally, smiling apologetically as she daubed at her wet eyes. But her smile vanished as she looked into his face, and her lips trembled again.

"Kip, if you had died, I think I should have died, too," she said huskily. "It was my fault that you went to Long Ridge and fought those three men. If I hadn't said the things I said to you—"

"My fight with Haze Pollard had to come," he said when her voice faltered. "If he lived through that scrap last night, it will have to come again."

"There will be no 'again', Kip," she told him. "Haze Pollard joined his brother, Dan. Nat Graw and Cotton McFall are both in bed, badly wounded. But that fight was not last night. You've been here, unconscious, dangerously near death, for

POWDERSMOKE PEACE

five days. Kip, can you ever forgive me?"

She was close to tears again, and Kip McCuen smiled up at her, a bright, joyous something in his wan face.

"Forgive you?" he said gently. "Carolyn, there's nothin' to forgive."

She bent swiftly, and their lips touched, while his arm tightened about her.

When the doorknob rattled Carolyn brought herself upright, flushing so that she was more beautiful than ever, McCuen decided. She patted hastily at her dark curls, and Kip glowered when young Ed Turner walked into the room, looked from one to the other of them, and grinned hugely.

"I'll only take a moment, nurse," Ed said airily. "Just dropped in to see how the patient was coming along. I'll knock next time."

Carolyn looked extremely uncomfortable, but Kip's scowl vanished when Ed Turner winked at him. Ed came on to the bedside, his grin changing to a boyish, lop-sided affair that made him look anything but cocky and arrogant.

"I made them bring you out here to the ranch, McCuen, because I was afraid you'd get well and leave the country before I had a chance to show you that I'm not as much of an ass as you probably think," the youngster said. "I had a speech all made up—an offer to make you concernin' stayin' on here at the Seven K."

"You want me to stay here, after what happened that day?" McCuen asked.

Ed's grin vanished, his face flushed. "I sure do," he said stoutly. "I like you. I like you because you're the first human being I ever met who didn't put me on a pedestal and start pamperin' me. I want to be treated like a man, not like a toddlin' baby. In case she forgets to tell you, I apologized to Sis for what I said the day you whacked my ears for me. Think it over, McCuen. About stayin' here, I mean."



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"Thanks, Ed," McCuen said heartily.

"Then it's settled!" Ed said happily.

He turned, looked down at his sister, and his eyes twinkled.

"After Uncle Jim Orr told us what you said about cuttin' off a snake's head the other day, McCuen, we all saddled up and rode to town as fast as horses could carry us," Ed went on. "It was Sis, here, who tumbled to what you meant about that snake's head when Uncle Jim repeated your words. We went to the marshal's office, and learned that you had just left, after askin' where Pollard could be found. Now I can't be sure, Kip, but I think Sis was pretty scared when she found out that you'd gone to beard the lion all alone. So unless I was mistaken about why she took on I think she'll okay this deal.

"Ed Turner, you clear out of here!" Carolyn said, severely.

Ed skittered away, darted down the room and out the door. But he poked his head back in, grinning widely. "You've even got Sis actin' human towards me," he declared. "That's the first time she ever showed her claws."

The youngster was gone then, and Kip McCuen smiled up at the flushed but obviously happy Carolyn.

THE END

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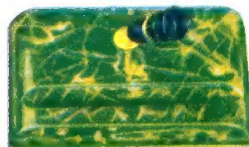
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